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the 1990s, the number of people in the UK who are aged 65 and over has increased by 1.5 million (1990–2000) and is projected to increase by a further 1.5 million by 2020 (Office for National Statistics 2001).

There is a growing awareness of the need to develop strategies to meet the needs of the ageing population. The Department of Health (2000) has identified the need to develop a new paradigm of care for the ageing population, one that is based on the concept of 'active ageing'. This paradigm is based on the idea that older people should be able to live independently, to participate in social and community activities, and to maintain a high level of physical and mental health. The Department of Health (2000) has identified a number of key areas for action in order to achieve this paradigm, including: (1) the need to improve the physical and mental health of older people; (2) the need to improve the social and community participation of older people; and (3) the need to improve the independence of older people.

One of the key areas for action identified by the Department of Health (2000) is the need to improve the physical and mental health of older people. This is a complex issue, as there are a number of factors that can contribute to the physical and mental health of older people. These factors include: (1) the presence of chronic health conditions; (2) the presence of mental health problems; (3) the presence of social isolation; and (4) the presence of physical disability. The Department of Health (2000) has identified a number of key areas for action in order to improve the physical and mental health of older people, including: (1) the need to improve the physical and mental health of older people; (2) the need to improve the social and community participation of older people; and (3) the need to improve the independence of older people.

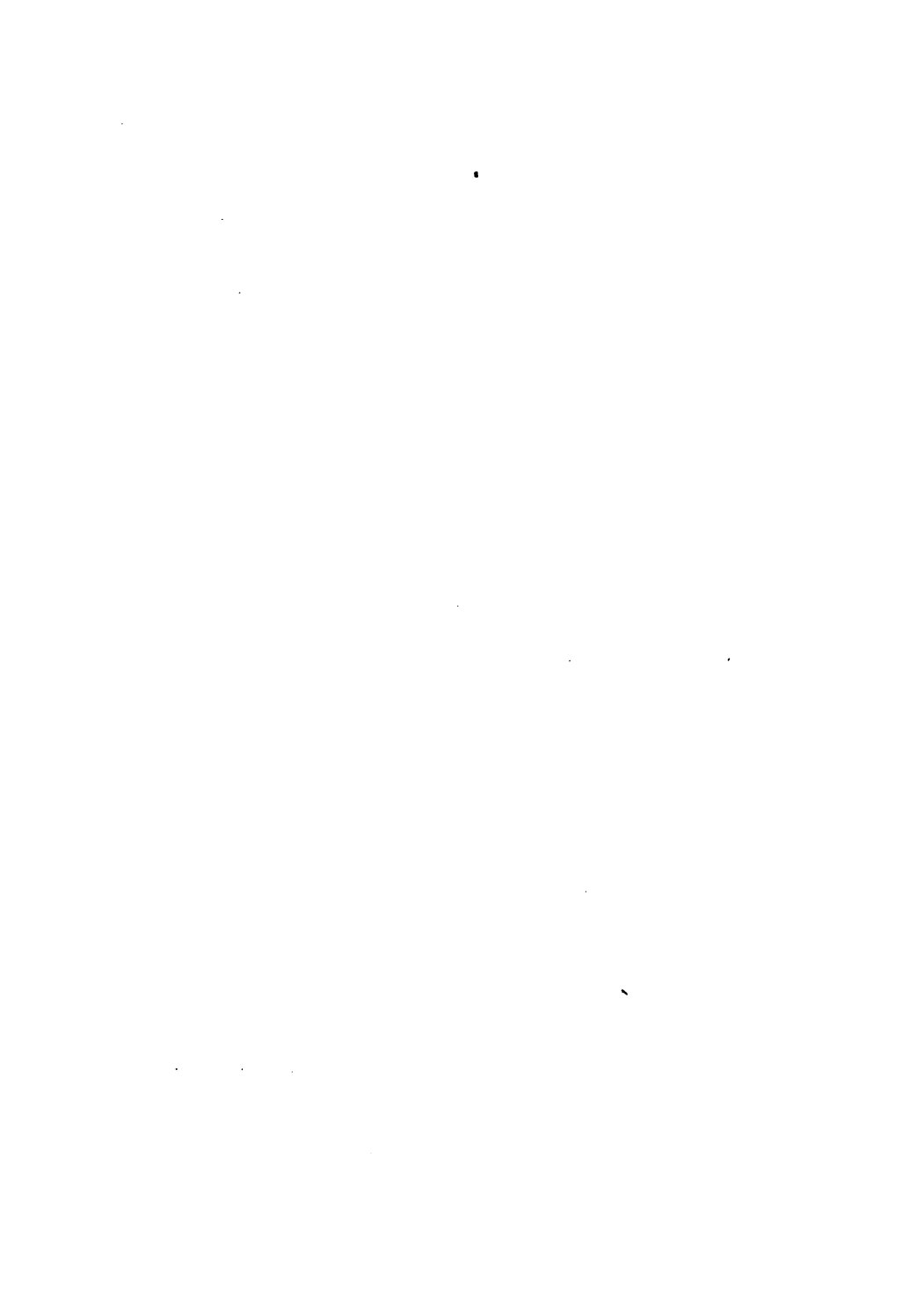
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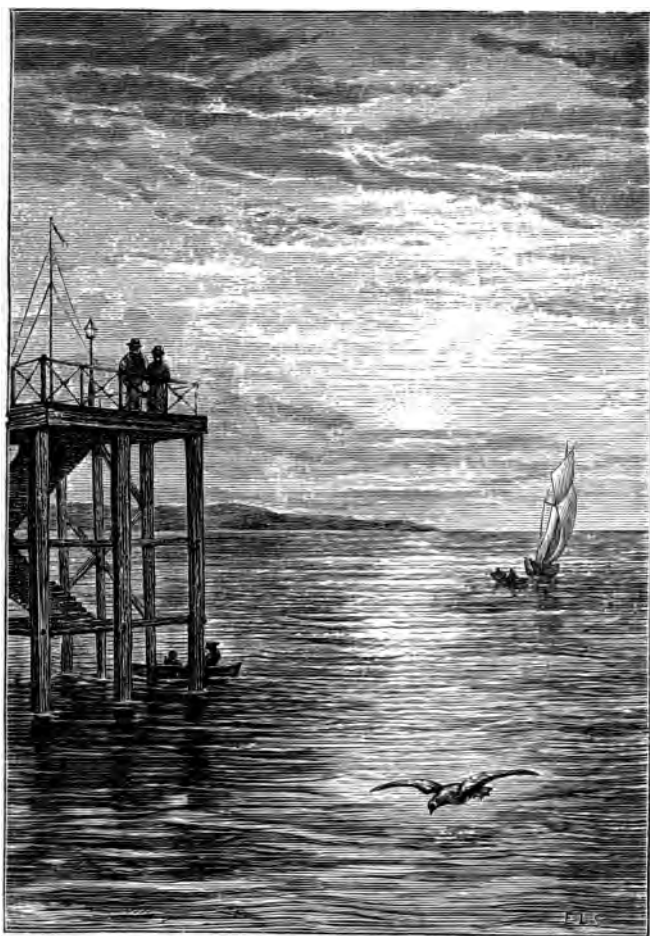
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The sun, as he neared the hills, threw the clouds from him on either side, and presently there was revealed one of those gorgeous sunsets for which the Bristol Channel is celebrated.'—Page 249.

JOANNA'S INTERFERENCE

A Story of Young Life

BY MARY HARRISON

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY W. H. WOODWARD
AND A PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR

"Children of God are the people who stray
and find their place with a surprise."
—MRS. J. W. WOODWARD, THE PLAYERS
OF THE LITTLE THEATRE, NEW YORK.

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F. W. MYERS

JOHN L. JACKSON, & HALLIDAY, 24 FLEET STREET
LONDON, E.C. 4

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JOANNA'S INHERITANCE;

A Story of Young Lives.

BY

EMMA MARSHALL,

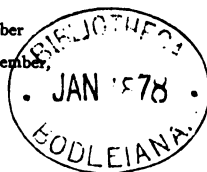
AUTHOR OF "MRS. MAINWARING'S JOURNAL," "LIFE'S
AFTERMATH," ETC., ETC.

"Children of God ! and each as he is straying
Lights on his fellow with a soft surprise ;
Hearkens, perchance, the whisper of his praying,
Catches the human answer of his eyes.

"Then having met, they speak, and they remember
All are one family, their Sire is one ;
Cheers them with June and slays them with December,
Portions to each the shadow and the sun.

"Therefore his children hold to one another,
Speak of a hope and tarry till the end ;
Strong in the bond of sister and of brother,
Safe in the fellowship of friend and friend."

F. W. MYERS.



SEELEY, JACKSON, & HALLIDAY, 54, FLEET STREET,
LONDON. MDCCCLXXVII.

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dark head which was bowed over the German dictionary, and liberally sprinkled the book, and powdered the glossy raven hair which Cecil Prendergast always prided herself was neatly coiled round her head.

"Truda, how shameful it is of you to disturb me every day in this way! How can I possibly get my lessons ready? how can I do anything with such a provoking creature always bothering me?"

"Come now, Cecil, I have blown it all off, it will only dry the ink of your exercise; fine sand on your head is like water on a duck's back. Now if it had been on mine it would be different. Don't be cross, old Cecil, but let us relieve our minds about Joanna. Such a hideous name, such a frightful name!"

"I rather like it," said Cecil; "it reminds me of one of the most beautiful characters in history."

"Stop now; don't rush off to history. Joan d'Arc you mean, a sentimental young woman who heard voices, and chose to dress up in men's armour, and——"

"Died a glorious death," said Cecil, her dark eyes kindling; "but it is useless to talk to you, Truda, you make fun of everything."

"I! my dear Cecil. I am a poet: did I not tell you so, five minutes ago? But put away your books, and let us talk over Joanna before the boys

come in from school. Charlie has an imposition to finish, so he will be here directly. How short the days are getting!" Truda exclaimed, as she stirred the fire vigorously, and seated herself on a low stool, her elbows on her knees, and her round cheeks resting on two very fair, white little hands.

"It is so unlike papa to bring this girl here," Gertrude began; "as to old Lady Beauclerc being a patient, fifty old ladies are his patients."

"But they may not die and leave their grandchildren alone and friendless in the world. I think it is just like papa to take this girl and be kind to her; besides, Lady Beauclerc begged him to do so."

"Yes, but to be so secret about it, never to tell us till the day before yesterday, and to make such a fuss about our being kind to her, and to order us not to gossip about her, just as if we should gossip."

Cecil smiled. Although the autumn twilight was deepening she was not idle like Gertrude; but having put her books neatly away, she was knitting vigorously, as she leaned back in the well-worn arm-chair which had borne the rough treatment of many years in the Priory schoolroom.

"I don't think we are above gossip, Gertrude, in this house."

"Oh! I know what you mean. We all talk at

once, at least I and the boys and Aunt Helen do ; and we like to discuss things with each other. But that is not gossip. To-day when Lottie and Mary Cuthbert came with ears wide open to the German class, and were sweeter than they have been for ages, and wanted to know all about this plan of having Lady Beauclerc's granddaughter here, didn't I shut them up ? Don't I know how they will kiss her, and tell her she is lovely, and make no end of fuss with her, just because of that stupid title before her ugly name ! No, Cecil, no one can say I gossip ; to talk to you is quite another thing. But to go back to Joanna. Dear me ! Every time I say the name I think it is more frightful. Aunt Helen has been fidgeting about the spare bedroom all day, and papa says Joanna is to have the dressing-room too, and put her books and possessions there. I know we shall find her a dreadful nuisance, and I am determined to keep her at a distance."

"You will be her dear friend before this day week, Truda ; but I think it is not right for us to set ourselves against papa's wishes, and from what he says I do not think he could do otherwise than take Joanna till she comes of age, and can be her own mistress,"

"Will she be enormously rich I wonder ?" Truda said,

"Well, of course not so rich as if she had been a boy. The estates and money go with the title, but she is to have Ashton Court, which she inherits from her grandmother, and money also. But really, as papa said he did not wish us to talk to her about all this, of course we must not do so. We will make up our minds to like Joanna, and I hope you won't tease her out of her life, Gertrude."

"Oh, she will fare no better than you do," said Gertrude; "don't expect it. Here are the boys, and now there is an end of peace."

The sound of heavy boyish feet upon the stairs was followed by the bursting open of the school-room door, and a loud voice exclaimed:-

"All in the dark! why can't you light the gas? where's a match? Look sharp, Gertrude!" and Charlie Prendergast, seizing a piece of paper, twisted it up, and thrusting it into the fire held a blazing torch up to the chandelier, which he pulled towards him with a rough hand.

"Take care, Charlie; there, only look!" and as the chandelier swung back with violence one of the glass shades, the screw of which had been loosened, quivered and toppled off with a loud crash.

"There!" said Charlie, and he drew a chair to the table with his foot, and began to write upon a sheet of foolscap paper, dipping his pen into the

inkstand at every other word, and inking his first and second fingers till each had a black cap on it.

Cecil meantime had rung the bell that the fragments of glass might be swept up, but Gertrude took no notice of the accident; such breakages were, I fear, too common in the Prendergast family to excite much astonishment.

"How many lines, Charlie?" Gertrude asked presently.

"Two hundred more; do hold your tongue."

"When have you got to show it up?"

"This evening at preparation; the old gaffer did it to spite me of course."

"I cannot imagine what can be the pleasure of so many impositions," Cecil said quietly. "You have one every day."

Charlie muttered, "Say twice a day, one is as true as the other;" and he went on scribbling in hot haste.

The door now opened again, and a boy of sixteen came in, followed by the housemaid.

"What are you ringing for?" the latter asked sharply. She was an old servant, and privileged to express her opinions to the children. "Ringing and ringing, just as one is trying to get forward with one's work! What is it?"

"One of the shades fell off the gas," Cecil said, "and the floor is covered with bits of glass."

"I wonder what next," said Jane in an injured voice. "I am sure I never saw such a house as this; and now, as if there were not enough to do already, here's another child coming. Of course this is Master Charlie's doing."

"It was nobody's doing exactly," said Gertrude; "the screw must have been loose, or the shade would not have toppled over."

"Some of you children's meddling; it was all right this morning when I dusted it. Well, I shall tell Miss Prendergast."

"You need not trouble yourself, Jenny, I shall tell her myself," said Charlie; "though if the thing had not been loose it would not have happened. Now shut up."

"What is wrong with you, Oswald? you look like a mute at a funeral," Gertrude said, as her elder brother sat down to the table with a book.

"Oh, he is glum because he has lost his place in the sixth. That fellow Harper major has done it at last. Cheer up, old boy! Here am I, nearly bottom of the third, and as merry as a grig."

"*You*," said Oswald contemptuously; "as if any one cared for what you said or did. But you need

not say what is untrue for your own amusement, at my expense."

"Does your head ache, Oswald?" Cecil asked.

"It always aches," growled Oswald.

"Then you ought to tell papa; he said you were on no account to work when you had a headache. You ought not to go to preparation to-night."

Oswald's reply was to shut his book hastily and leave the room.

"He is fagging himself to death," said Charlie, "and I hate to see it, and that grinning idiot Harper will keep ahead of him now, I expect; and old Birchall is as pleased as Punch. He always likes the boarders to be before day boys."

"That is nonsense," said Cecil. "I believe Mr. Birchall is strictly just. But I really must tell papa about Oswald. Gertrude, have you prepared your lessons for Miss Scales?"

"I have done two lines, or perhaps three; I may do two more after tea."

"How provoking Truda is!" Cecil sighed as she left the room. "How can any one be of use to a girl like her? And Aunt Helen is always saying I am the eldest of the family, and ought to do this and be that, and says I am useless and self-absorbed. I scarcely know whether to tell papa about Oswald; it may only make Oswald angry if papa interferes."

And yet how ill he looks ! perhaps papa will notice it at tea ; I hope he will, if only Aunt Helen does not talk his fever all over, he does so hate it."

So Cecil thought, as she went slowly along the corridor towards the drawing-room, from which a sound of voices reached her ear and warned her that Miss Prendergast had visitors. As she was hesitating whether to go in or not, the door opened and her little sister Daisy came out.

"I was sent to call you, Cissy," she said. "Aunt Helen says you are to come. There's all the Cuthberts there, and Mrs. Stuart, and Mr. Hastings. They have had afternoon tea, and they are all talking at once. Mrs. Stuart is a widow like Aunt Mary, only so pretty, and——"

"What a chatterbox you are !" exclaimed Cecil. "Have you and Sibyl been in the drawing-room all the afternoon ?"

"Since we had our tea," said Daisy, a child of eight years old, who was in the conscious glory of a new blue merino, over which clouds of fair hair rested. "And do you know, Mr. Hastings says I am like Gertrude, and that Sibyl is like you, and——"

It was as the child said : every one seemed to be talking at once ; and when Cecil entered the drawing-room it was difficult to understand how any

connected thread could be carried on amidst the strife of tongues. Miss Prendergast's voice was above all others ; it always was. Just the gossip which the Doctor had forbidden was now holding undisputed sway. Cecil heard her own name.

"She is about Cecil's age, but a mere child, ignorant of the simplest things, I believe. Poor old Lady Beauclerc had a perfect horror of schools or of governesses, and poor Joanna has been brought up in complete seclusion."

"Cecil dear, here are Lottie and May Cuthbert ; why did you not come before ?"

"I was in the schoolroom, Aunt Helen," Cecil said shortly ; and then Cecil became disagreeably conscious that Mrs. Cuthbert was kissing her, and she had to go through the same ceremony with Lottie and May.

Gertrude's outspoken opinion recurred to her ; this sudden outburst of affection from the Cuthberts, after many months of coldness, must have reference to Joanna, and yet Cecil hated herself for the thought.

Next came Mr. Hastings' greeting, which was always kindly, and he turned to the widow lady who had excited little Daisy's admiration, and said : "May I introduce my sister to you ?"

Cecil turned and met the glance of a pair of

beautiful eyes, beautiful in their expression and defying all description. An instant feeling rose in the young girl's heart of liking and admiration ; and indeed that calm, sweet face, looking out from under the widow's bonnet, was one in which was written the story of chastened sorrow and abiding love which is so attractive to young and old.

"My sister, Mrs. Stuart, is come to take care of me in St. Mary's Vicarage," Mr. Hastings said. "Now I hope you and your sisters will often find your way there. Constance will be very glad to see you ; and we want you to come to spend the evening with us to-morrow."

"Oh ! thank you," Cecil said, and then hesitated. "To-morrow I am afraid we can't come, for we expect Joanna Coningham, and I think papa would not like us to be away when she arrives."

"Well then, we will say Saturday ; and we shall hope to see you at tea at half-past six—you and Gertrude, and Miss Coningham and the boys."

"I don't think the boys can come to tea ; they go to the school-house for preparation every evening from seven to nine ; but perhaps they may come for us afterwards."

"That will do capitally," Mr. Hastings remarked, and then turned to answer a question from Mrs. Cuthbert. She had been listening to the conversation,

and rather hoped Lottie and May might be included in the invitation given to Cecil. But Mr. Hastings and Mrs. Stuart soon went away, and nothing was said about it, much to the two Cuthberts' disappointment.

"How nice looking the eldest girl is, Henry!" Mrs. Stuart said, as she and her brother walked home-wards together.

"Yes, poor child! I always feel for her, the eldest of that motherless family, and the place of the mother supplied by that most provoking Miss Prendergast. I do believe she talks night and day. How people can go on at an even pace in that way without being exhausted I can't conceive. She is my terror in the parish. If little Jane or Mary Smith has the measles, I hear of it till I am weary of their name. If John Stubbs plays the truant, or Mark Preston is flogged by his drunken father, Miss Prendergast makes each event a theme for ten minutes' talk whenever I meet her. And yet she is very good, and does her duty by those poor children as far as she sees it."

"Has their mother been dead long?"

"Oh yes! when little Sibyl was born. And about two years ago the eldest boy, Oswald, had a bad attack of typhoid fever. It touched his brain a little, poor fellow! I mean he was a boy of extraordinary

promise, and now any strain or overwork knocks him up. The next boy is a fine, handsome fellow, but a regular pickle, and always in mischief. The second girl, Gertrude, is like him and lives in scrapes. But, Constance, I think you may do a great deal for them, poor children. You will like to have a special interest, and here is one. Those children want to be set going in the right direction ; they want to be shown that religion is not a thing for Sundays and services only, but that it should be the leaven of daily life ; coming in to quicken joy and smooth trouble, and to keep us hopeful and humble at the same time. You know what I mean, Constance."

"Yes, Henry ; and you must help me to rouse myself, and give me heaps of work, and make me useful in all ways. What should I have done if I had not had your house to come to ? God is very good to provide me with such a home."

"And me with such a sister and companion," he said. "A week's trial has shown me what a mistake bachelor life is ; one must have somebody to whom one can say solitude is sweet."

"Where is Rose now, Henry ? You have never mentioned her in your letters, and since I have been at the other side of the world I have lost many links, especially since our mother died."

"Rose is married," Mr. Hastings said abruptly. "I

cannot speak of her, Constance. She never loved me ; it was all delusion, but please let the dead past bury its dead. Let me be thankful that I have you."

"And let me be thankful in my great sorrow that I am where Francis wished me to be. He did not wish me to remain at the mission, and judged rightly as he always did, I know. My health might have failed without his tender care, and I was not fit to struggle with many difficulties alone. I often feel him very near me, Henry, and I like to think I am where he wished me to be ; and may God help me to do His will."

It was nearly dark when the brother and sister reached the Vicarage, and a blazing fire in the square hall sent out a cheerful welcome as they went in together. Two or three poor people were waiting, and Mrs. Stuart took down their names from her brother, and then listened patiently to the story each had to tell, promising to come to-morrow and see the sick child of one and the old mother of another.

Then Mrs. Stuart went to the kitchen to investigate the condition of some beef-tea she had been preparing for another invalid, and in a quarter of an hour she was in the dining-room presiding over her brother's "high tea," and talking pleasantly on any subject which interested him. It was the precious

gift of sympathy which had made Mrs. Stuart so useful in her work as a missionary's wife in India ; it was this same gift which acted as a talisman upon all with whom she was brought in contact. For the time she threw herself into the concerns and interests of others, and it was in this that Mr. Hastings hoped she would prove so useful a friend to the young Prendergasts. For every one who was associated with the household at the Priory was struck with the want of harmony that prevailed there. The children all loved each other, and the loss of one of their number by death would have been felt as a great sorrow ; but there was not amongst them the keen participation in each other's joys or little troubles which is as the salt of daily life.

Cecil would lament over Oswald's headaches, and feel sorry for him to a certain extent ; but she had no idea of entering into the bitterness which often filled the boy's heart, as he saw his once brilliant prospect of success clouded, and those who were at one time so far behind him in the race winning upon him with very little effort.

It was the same about Gertrude. Cecil's idea of influencing her wild impetuous sister was in constantly remonstrating with her, and repeating that she was unladylike and rough, and imitated Charlie in everything ; while Gertrude took a delight in

teasing Cecil by her pranks, and setting her opinion at defiance.

Charlie and Gertrude had more in common ; but it is to be feared the words of the old servant were true, and that there was often " not a pin to choose between them." The two little girls were, as Gertrude said, the ornamental tail to the family. They were petted and admired perhaps more than was good for them, and Daisy and Sibyl knew their power with their aunt and their father, and exerted it.

Miss Prendergast was great in afternoon teas, and the drawing-room at the Priory was a favourite resort for unoccupied people, between four and five, especially in winter. The meal, which was partly dinner and partly tea, was nominally at half-past six, and the two boys went straight from the table to their evening preparation at seven o'clock at the Head-master's house, which was very near the Priory. Dr. Prendergast seldom came in till nearly the end of the meal, and then the bell was rung, and a hot dish was brought in for him, just as the boys were starting for the school-house.

Dr. Prendergast had all the principal practice of Minsterholme and the neighbourhood, and was the acknowledged friend of rich and poor. He was often preoccupied and *distract*, and the amount of talk at the table only represented to him a con-

fusion of tongues, and a still greater confusion of ideas which he did not trouble himself to disentangle. This evening, however, Oswald's heavy eyes attracted his notice.

"Working too hard, Oswald," he said, as the boy pushed back his chair, leaving an egg untouched by his plate and his scone barely tasted. "Stop," he said authoritatively as Oswald was leaving the room : "you quite understand that you are not to try for the University scholarship this year. I will not hear of it."

Oswald's thin sensitive lips quivered, but he answered in a proud cold tone : "You need not trouble yourself about the scholarship. I can hardly keep a place in this little school. I know where I should come out if I did try. Be quiet!" he said sharply to his little sister Sibyl, who came skipping in to sit by her father while he eat his dinner, and as she ran against her brother a book fell from his hand. He gave the little girl a rough push, which made her knock her head against the door. Tears followed more than the occasion required ; and Dr. Prendergast said sharply : "How can you be such a coward as to vent your ill-temper on your little sister?" taking the child as he spoke on his knee, and soothing her tenderly.

"Papa, Oswald is not well," Cecil began, and he has lost his place to-day in the sixth he has held so

long against Harper. Pray, don't let Sibyl spoil your tea, papa. Do put her down," and Cecil took hold of Sibyl's arm to remove her.

"Leave her alone, Cecil," Miss Prendergast said. "Poor little thing! she always enjoys this time more than any other, and your father likes having her."

"Papa ought to have his dinner in peace," Cecil murmured, "and he ought never to be troubled with these children at all. He ought to dine at seven by himself."

Cecil, I really must beg you not to interfere with my household arrangements. The burden of house-keeping for this family is quite enough without having to think of two dinners. The Cuthberts' hours are precisely the same as ours, and so are the Birleys'. Unless the establishment is very large, late dinners as a rule are impossible. It was only the other day that I was speaking of this to Miss Birley, and she quite agreed with me."

A long discourse now followed from Miss Prendergast, on the merits of late dinners and luncheons, and early dinners and high teas. Then Gertrude broke in with the request that she might go and practise, which Miss Prendergast was granting, when her father said: "Wait a minute, Truda. I want to speak to you. I had a note to-day from M. Le Bras, complaining of you."

"I don't wonder," chimed in Cecil. "Gertrude makes all the girls in the class laugh, and is so silly."

"I shall never get a good word from you, I know," said Gertrude; "but fire away, papa."

"Gertrude, what a disrespectful way to speak to your father!" Aunt Helen interposed. "I told M. Le Bras a little time ago that my remonstrances were useless, and that the next time he had any complaint to make, it must be to your father."

"Send Sibyl upstairs, Helen," Dr. Prendergast said: "I think she had better not hear all this."

"I am sure I don't want to hear it either," said Cecil; "so I will take Sibyl away. And if you are good," she added, addressing the child, "I will read a chapter of 'Susy' to you and Daisy."

This was a temptation not to be resisted, and Sibyl went off in the best temper imaginable.


"Look here, Gertrude," her father said, looking very grave, and producing a letter from his pocket-book. "M. Le Bras is greatly annoyed at this stupid caricature which, he says, you employed yourself in producing at the last German lesson. All personal attacks are vulgar and ill-bred. Anything that may hurt the feelings of another, whether written, spoken, or drawn, is an offence against good manners. I should think any girl would be ashamed of this."

Gertrude laughed as her father held towards her a sheet of paper covered with pen and ink sketches, but the laugh was forced, and she was blushing crimson.

"Papa! it was only fun, and I never meant the old creature to see it."

"M. Le Bras is young enough to be my son," her father said; "the adjective is misplaced. I am sure your aunt will agree with me that some apology is due to M. Le Bras, and that a stop must be put to all the nonsense which seems to go on at this class. I don't care to pay M. Le Bras two guineas a quarter for a result like this." And even as he spoke there was a shadow of a smile hovering round the Doctor's mouth, and Gertrude was too sharp not to see it.

The sheet of paper about which this discussion had arisen was divided into two parts or sections. On one was represented Joan d'Arc with her hands clasping the cross, and beneath it was written "The Joanna of the Past." On the other side was the figure of the French master, his waxed moustache, spectacles, and pose excellently done. His eyes were glaring at a small crouching figure of a girl whose long black hair he had seized, apparently in an ecstasy of wrath, and beneath was written "The Joanna of the Future," and in German the sentence



from Schiller's play coming from M. Le Bras's mouth : "*Bist du es, wunderbares Mädchen.*" The ghost of a smile on her father's face emboldened Gertrude, and she was further encouraged by seeing Miss Prendergast hiding her laughter behind her pocket-handkerchief.

"Papa," Gertrude said, "is Joanna's likeness as good as M. Le Bras's? Do tell me. It is exactly what I fancy she is like, a little black elfish thing, with dark hair all over her shoulders." Gertrude had now put her arm round her father's neck, and was looking down into his face as he leaned back in his chair, with her blue frank eyes.

Dr. Prendergast did not repulse her ; of all his children, he felt it to be the most difficult to be angry with Gertrude ; she was so like her who had gladdened his youth and been the one love of his maturer life, the mother whose care and tender watchfulness these children so sadly needed.

"My dear," he said, "you can draw very well ; turn your talents to a better purpose than this. Do not waste your whole youth in folly! Life is a serious business, and we have all our work to do ; yours is to go on with your education like a sensible girl. You will soon be a woman, Gertrude."

"Oh no, papa! I am not quite fifteen. Don't

call me a woman yet. I like to be young, and do nice things."

All this was passing in a low tone between father and daughter, and Miss Prendergast was still talking. It really did not matter to her whether she had listeners or not.

"Yes, you must apologise, Gertrude ; that is very clear ; apologise for such a flagrant breach of good manners. I am sure your papa thinks so."

Gertrude shrugged her angular shoulders.

"Must I, papa?"

"Yes, yes ; when does M. Le Bras come again?"

"The day after to-morrow, and Joanna will be here, this wonderful Joanna ; and that will make it worse. But I will catch him in the hall and get it over there, that will be best. What time will the 'expected guest' arrive, as Mrs. Cuthbert calls her?"

"I shall drive over to Ashton some time in the afternoon, and bring her back with me. Now run away, dear, I have a great deal of writing on hand this evening."

About nine o'clock Oswald came home, looking weary and depressed, and flung himself heavily on a sofa in the drawing-room.

"Don't put your feet on the sofa, Oswald," said

Aunt Helen. "Look how you are crumpling up that couvrette."

Oswald moved a little, and drew his legs off the sofa.

"Can't you play something, Cecil?" he asked. "I like that thing of Mendelssohn's, that talking between two people."

"Oh! I can't play that. I don't know it; it is very difficult."

"I heard you playing it last evening; but I never knew you do anything I asked you in my life. Where is Gertrude?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Cecil dreamily. She was reading a story of Mrs. Wood's, and did not care to be disturbed.

"Is Charlie come in?" Miss Prendergast asked.

Again the same answer from the brother as Cecil had given: "I am sure I don't know."

"But he ought to be in," Miss Prendergast said. "It is odd that two brothers cannot walk home together."

"He is with Weston, I dare say," said Oswald; "it is all right."

"It is not all right if Charlie is walking about Minsterholme at this time in the evening. I must really appeal to your father."

"Weston is a horrid boy," Cecil volunteered.

"Charlie always does pick up with the worst boys. Did he give in that imposition, Oswald?"

"Really I wish you would be quiet," said Oswald; "I have nothing to do with Charlie at school."

"Or at home either," Cecil said in her low provoking voice. "You are by no means David and Jonathan at any time."

Oswald professed to be engrossed with a magazine, and made no reply to this.

Meanwhile Gertrude was in the schoolroom, writing her essay in a desultory fashion, and wondering why Charlie did not come in. The schoolroom windows looked out upon the road, and Gertrude could see as far as the school-house gate.

She often took up her position there to watch the boys coming home; and to-night she made many journeys backwards and forwards to the window, her essay "On the domestic and political character of Charles I." suffering considerably in consequence. At last, at nearly half-past nine, by the light of the gas lamp she saw Charlie running up the road. She flew downstairs, pen in hand, to let him in at the hall-door. She had done this before, and thus saved the ringing of the bell which proclaimed to the household the precise time of his return.

"It is more than half-past nine," she said, as Charlie passed her.

"Well, what of that? Weston and two other fellows won't be home for another half hour at least."

"But papa does so dislike you to go anywhere after prep."

"He should not send us to prep. then; it's all nonsense, I did my work much better at home."

"Oh, Charlie!" Gertrude exclaimed.

"Well, I did it as well. I say, Truda, have you any money about you?"

"I have got about six shillings, no more."

"Oh! that will do. Just put it in my room under the tin box on the washing-table when you go to bed. I'll pay you back. I am sure to get a tip on my birthday."

"What do you want it for, Charlie? You shall have it of course, but I hope it is not for Weston."

Charlie whistled and evaded an answer; and though Gertrude felt uneasy, she said no more, but put the six shillings duly under the tin box before she went to sleep that night.

These were the children, and this the home, to which Joanna Coningham was coming. A new life indeed for her, and a new element for them. Little did any of them dream what Joanna was to bring to them. That mysterious veil which divides the present from the future is mercifully ordained by God. We are to learn to take each day as a part of

the great whole ; we are not to reason or question, but believe. No incident of our lives cometh by chance : as we use it, as we receive it, so does it lend a colour to the unseen future. God would have it blend in beautiful harmony with the *whole*. The child at school, the boy in the office, or the youth at Oxford, cannot, if he would, separate one day, nay one hour, from the life appointed him by God.

Let us see to it then that we take all—joy, trouble, labour, rest, crosses, and smooth places—from Him ; for truly He appointeth our lot, and by His grace that lot is the one of all others suited to our individual need, and destined, if we will have it so, to work out for us that which our mortal eye seeth not, nor heart of man can conceive.

CHAPTER II.

PAST AND PRESENT.

MINSTERHOLME was a quiet town, lying in a valley of one of our southern counties. The great church of St. Augustine, with its stately belfry tower and long vaulted nave, was as large as some of our cathedrals.

The King's School was attached to it, and had existed in its present form since Henry the Eighth was king. The school had taken a good place in the county when locomotion was difficult, and the parents of the neighbouring gentry often sent their sons to the Head-master's house in preference to one of the large public schools, thereby saving long journeys, and really getting a very good classical education for their boys at a low rate. But railways, which had brought Minsterholme in contact with the world, had not proved an unmixed advantage.

Many families now resorted to Rugby and Win-

chester for their children's education, and though there was still a fair sprinkling of the sons of small squires, clergymen, and professional men, Mr. Birchall had not come in for the palmy days of the school.

But he was a young, vigorous man, full of energy and zeal ; and in three years he had infused life into the school, and had brought about many reforms, which were of course looked suspiciously on at first, but gradually won their way to favour.


Dr. Prendergast had been educated at the King's School, and a brother who died in early manhood had taken the very scholarship at University College upon which poor Oswald had set his heart. As the Doctor drove through the streets of his native town on his way to Ashton, his thoughts were busy with the past. A leading review lay uncut upon his knee, and he sat back in his carriage unconscious of the smiles and bows of a bevy of ladies who were standing at the corner of the High Street, hoping in vain for a look of recognition, which as he drove past Dr. Prendergast often vouchsafed, to their extreme satisfaction. Dr. Prendergast felt that his family was, so to speak, dislocated ; there was no union nor harmony in its movements, and how would it be with the poor, shy little stranger who was now to take her place amongst his children ?

The Doctor almost doubted the wisdom of his compliance with the request, even though so strongly urged on him as it was by Joanna's grandmother.

Long years of seclusion at Ashton Court had narrowed Lady Beauclerc's sympathies, while old age had strengthened her faults; and the natural suspiciousness of her disposition had grown to be a misery to herself and those about her.

Poor Joanna's father had died when she was an infant, and there were circumstances connected with his death which were sad and distressing.

His mother had been deceived in him; he had married without her knowledge a poor, friendless girl, who was left a broken-hearted widow with a helpless baby in the second year of her marriage. Lord Beauclerc's title and estates went to a distant relation, and old Lady Beauclerc took to her home, which she inherited from her father, the daughter-in-law whom she had never seen till she was summoned to her son's death-bed. Ashton Court was a stately but gloomy home, and before Joanna had passed her second birthday her fair, gentle mother had been laid to rest in the quiet churchyard. Her loving nature had pined and drooped in the gloom and seclusion in which she had existed. Love, which is the essence of life, was not known at Ashton Court. Strictly just, but never tender, Lady



Beauclerc had done what she believed to be her duty by her daughter-in-law and her grandchild, but she never indulged in a caress, nor did a gentle word of praise ever fall from her lips. She saw few people outside Ashton Court ; Dr. Prendergast was the only person she admitted to her confidence. She told him more of the past than any man had ever heard, and she committed Joanna to him on her death-bed, making him and the old family lawyer trustees of the property and guardians of the heiress till she came of age.

Dr. Prendergast had tried in vain to represent that Joanna might be better fitted for her future position by the routine of a really good school. He suggested that a home where there were fewer children, and more of the luxuries of life might be desirable. He would do his best, he said, but necessarily he was but little with his family. They were all brought up with great plainness and simplicity ; his income was a professional one, and he was obliged to think of the future of his sons and daughters. But on this point he was constrained to touch but lightly ; the idea of any profit arising from the proposed arrangement was far from the Doctor's thoughts.

When Lady Beauclerc's will was opened on the day of the funeral, her wishes were set forth with great

clearness. The old lawyer knew the contents of the short, concise document, although Dr. Prendergast did not. Three hundred a year was the sum set apart for Joanna's maintenance, education, and other requirements, till she reached the age of twenty-one years ; then she was to exercise her own discretion as to whether she would remove to Ashton Court or remain with Dr. Prendergast. She was not to marry till she was of age, and any proposals beforehand were to be rejected by her guardians. She was to be entirely submissive to Dr. Prendergast, and he was to exercise all due authority over her. No communication whatever was to be held with the present Lord Beauclerc or his family—the guardians were to be decided on this point—and as for relations on her mother's side, there were none. There was also a private memorandum thanking Dr. Prendergast for all his kindness and attention, but to his great relief no bequest was made him.

"Nothing but the girl for you," Mr. Field had said, "and a hundred pounds for me. I should be sorry to change places with you, Doctor : the child is not an attractive piece of humanity ; I can't get a word out of her ; perhaps when she gets amongst your young people she may do better."

Then Mr. Field dismissed the subject of the poor little heiress, and went on to discuss at length the

explicit directions left about Ashton Court. It was not to be let, after the profane fashion of these degenerate days; there was to be no change in the house; the housekeeper and butler, with one other servant, were to remain, and keep everything precisely as Lady Beauclerc left it; the gardener was to preside over the grounds and gardens, and the farm bailiff was to give him his orders. No expenses were to be incurred during Joanna's minority, beyond those which were absolutely necessary; thus a considerable income had every chance of accumulating in five years, and Joanna's inheritance would be a goodly one. What was it all to her?

On this last day of her old life she had risen early, and had roamed listlessly about the house and grounds. She shed no tears, there was nothing in her past to weep for. The solemnity of death had impressed her, as it always does impress the young; but she had stood by her grandmother's open grave with very little outward sign of feeling, and the first tears she shed were when Dr. Prendergast, on their return to the silent, spacious house from which the head had been taken, kissed her, and, retaining her hand, had held it caressingly in his own.

Joanna had not been a child to attach herself to the servants, and they thought her cold and un-

natural. "She has no more feeling than a door nail," Mrs. Pemberton remarked ; "no matter how she is hit,—and I don't say but that her ladyship did give it to her sometimes,—you can't make no impression no ways. I like children to be like children."

"Why, Mrs. Pemberton," said one of the servants, "who could be like a child here ? The place is as quiet as the grave itself ; and we have all got to move like cats about the house. I should say the poor child had forgotten how to laugh."

"It's not for *you* to go and talk in that way of your betters, Jane ; it is very impertinent, I can tell you."

Jane was silenced, but she watched Joanna all that last day with curious eyes.

A hush and silence indescribable fell over the face of nature on that calm October day. The song of birds was over in the woods ; the trees, with golden and crimson patches, stood motionless in the hazy sunlight which lay upon the fields and hills, and copse and meadow, with a subdued tender veil there was no breath to disturb. As Joanna moved noiselessly about in her black dress, her figure seemed in harmony with all around. Her footfall scarcely sounded in the long picture gallery, which was hung with portraits of her grandmother's family, the De Spencers. In this picture gallery on wet days the

child had always been sent to take exercise, and here she had learned to make acquaintance with all the stiff ladies and gentlemen of the days gone by. "Where were they now?" she would ask herself; "where was that other world where her mother had gone, and her unknown father, and all those people once so full of life and happiness?" There was one portrait of a mother and child which used to fascinate Joanna; it was a formal picture, but there was love in the answering look as the mother bent over the boy, who was holding up to her a little spaniel for her to admire, while her arm was thrown round the child with caressing tenderness.

What must it be to have love like that? and a sense of dearth and famine she could not put into words oppressed Joanna's heart. On this last afternoon, when Dr. Prendergast's carriage was drawing nearer and nearer, she went for the last time into the gallery. She had eaten her solitary dinner at the end of the long dining-table, and the old butler had waited upon her with a sort of punctilious ceremony, which seemed to be a mute recognition of her importance as the future mistress of Ashton Court; but Joanna could scarcely take a morsel of food, and was thankful when she was free again to follow her own devices.

She went through all the deserted rooms, which

seemed to repeat the hush which reigned without. The old-fashioned cabinets, filled with china, stood against the walls of the long, low drawing-rooms, filled with the faint scent of lavender and dead rose-leaves. Her grandmother's chair stood by the fireplace, in a little inner room beyond the two larger ones, which looked towards the drive. Lady Beauclerc had always sat here, for she liked to survey the approach to her house ; certainly not for the sake of seeing visitors, as so few ever came ; but this window, with its screen of big magnolia leaves shadowing it, was a watch-tower to the old mistress of Ashton Court.

Joanna had often looked at her as she sat musing with her eyes fixed on the sweep of the drive, with its border of stately elms, and wondered of what she was thinking. Poor old Lady Beauclerc had her memories lying far apart from the sad, lonely life which was all her young granddaughter had known and shared.

As Joanna stood with her hand upon the little work-table, where her last piece of needlework still lay, the quick trotting of horses' feet awoke her from her dream, and soon the doctor's carriage came in sight, and swept round to the entrance.

Joanna knew her time was come ; and in a few minutes more she was dressed, and standing in the

hall taking leave of the servants. Dr. Prendergast had been giving some orders about her boxes, and now stood looking at the child with some astonishment, as she demurely took the hand of each servant and bade her good-bye.

"We shall see you back here, Miss Coninghame, if our lives be spared," Mrs. Pemberton said ; "and you may depend on it, both Mr. Harley and me will do our best, and Ashton Court will be as well kept as though there was a lady here ; of that you may rest sure, Miss Coninghame."

The old butler bowed, and murmured something of the same kind ; and the servants were all deferential, and expressed by their manner that they recognised Joanna's new position. The poor shy girl of fifteen was only too glad to escape into Dr. Prendergast's carriage ; and having taken care to wrap his rug well round her, after a few kind words he took a book from his carriage bag, and began to read.

The six miles' drive was all too short for Joanna ; she dreaded the moment of arrival at the Priory, and felt it to be a reprieve when Dr. Prendergast pulled the check-string before a house at the entrance of the town, and said he must stop for a few minutes to see a patient about whom he was anxious.

The twilight was deepening fast, and the Minster clock chimed six, while Joanna sat in the carriage waiting. Then a rush of many feet, and loud hilarious voices attracted her ; she looked out, and saw a troop of schoolboys coming out of two great gates close to the Minster. Then a ringing boyish voice rose above the rest :

"I say, Harris, is papa gone into Mr. Gwynne's again? I am coming up." And there was a clambering up to the box seat of the carriage, and murmurs in Harris's voice which did not reach Joanna's ear. But presently a face was seen to press itself against the glass of the brougham, and Joanna drew farther back into the corner.

"Charlie, is that you?" asked Dr. Prendergast. "Now, no antics, if you please. Home," to the coachman, was the next word, and then the carriage moved off again.

"Well, my dear, we are nearly at the Priory now. I am sorry to have kept you waiting ; but the case was an urgent one. I hope you will be happy with us, and in time like us. You must try to feel at home."

Joanna felt that uncomfortable choking in her throat which Dr. Prendergast's kind words had produced at the funeral of her grandmother ; but she struggled to repress her tears, and it was with a

very set, stiff face that she entered the Priory hall. Charlie scampered off upstairs, and bursting open the schoolroom door, said :

"She is come! Do you hear, Oswald, Cecil, Gertrude? She is come!"

"You make row enough about it," was Oswald's rejoinder. "What have you done with my lexicon?"

"It is on the top shelf; no, I believe I left it at Weston's. I went into his place at break——"

"You may just fetch it then; or if you don't, it will be the worse for you."

"I should rather think so, for all my vocabulary is inside."

"Mind, Charlie," said Oswald, "you shall not take my books in this way, I say; I won't put up with it; I won't stand it——"

Here Oswald stopped, for voices were heard approaching, Aunt Helen's and Cecil's; and at the open door of the schoolroom there was a pause.

"This is the schoolroom," Aunt Helen said; "the girls sit here to prepare their lessons; but they have their French master in the dining-room; and only Miss Scales here. You are to join them. Charlie, Oswald, are you there? Come and be introduced to Miss Coninghame. My two nephews," Aunt Helen went on. "One very industrious; and the other——; well, it is hardly fair to tell tales, is

it? Your room is in this direction." And then the procession moved off; but Gertrude came back to say—

"She is as stiff as a poker, and so dark; just what I prophesied; and her dress is fastened behind with a row of hooks. Could you have believed it? How can she hook it up herself? that is the mystery."

Meanwhile Joanna had reached her room, bewildered with Miss Prendergast's stream of talk, and feeling utterly shy and miserable.

"If only Aunt Helen would let the poor thing alone," Truda said to Cecil, as they stood aside to let Miss Prendergast show the way into the little dressing-room, opening from the bedroom. "Now we shall hear the story of the book-shelves again, and the little writing-table. Yes, there she goes; it's too bad; but did you ever see anything so grim in your life as Joanna?"

"Take care, Truda," Cecil interposed, as Miss Prendergast and Joanna returned; the former by no means discouraged by the monosyllables which were uttered in return for her flood of words. People have different ways of showing kindness, and we must take all signs as they are intended—proofs of something that exists, of which the tokens vary with the disposition of those who express them.

Miss Prendergast was most anxious to be friendly and kind to Joanna ; but meeting with so little response, she left her at last, with the remark that "Tea was at half-past six ; and if she felt dull, she would find the girls in the schoolroom : that the housemaid would render her any assistance she needed, and she had only to ring the bell if she wanted anything."

Cecil lingered, settling the vase of chrysanthemums she had put upon the toilet table, and remarking that the gas did not give a good light.

Then she took Joanna's heavy crape hat from her hand, and said : "Shall I hang up your jacket ?" But Cecil was surprised by the quick impatient gesture with which the jacket was thrown down on the bed, while Joanna exclaimed almost vehemently :

"Do, pray, let me alone !" and the sudden flash of the great black eyes was as suddenly put out by a burst of tears.

Cecil speedily left the room, and found Gertrude rehearsing every particular in the schoolroom for her brothers' benefit.

"I have no doubt she will come round at last," said Cecil, "and we shall get on very well."

"She will never come round if she is pulled and hauled by Aunt Helen. Her tongue wagged faster than ever," said Charlie.

"Charlie," interposed Oswald, "you will be so good as to put your legs in motion towards the recovery of my lexicon ; and the sooner the better."

"There is not time before tea," Cecil said. "Don't let us have a fuss the first night Joanna is here, and there is sure to be a fuss if you are not at tea, Charlie."

But Charlie was gone, and his footsteps were heard ringing down the road towards the town.

Joanna, when left alone, stood where Cecil had left her, with her hands clasped tightly together. Past, present, and future all seemed to the child hopeless and dreary. Her quiet monotonous life had been suddenly broken in upon, and this was pain. Then the present was so strange and new, and she felt as if she could never find a place amongst these boys and girls, with their quick, rapid utterances, and energetic movements.

The future, lying out far in the haze of distance, seemed visionary and unreal, and the return to Ashton Court, of which the old housekeeper had spoken, could not be for six long years—six interminable years.

Then they talked of lessons and books, and masters and mistresses. How should she bear the humiliation of knowing nothing, for it seemed to Joanna that she did know absolutely nothing.

She had read dry histories to her grandmother, and old books of travel ; she had been through the French grammar with the old-fashioned pronunciation with which the English were content fifty years ago ; but beyond this Joanna's education had not gone. In needlework, indeed, she had few rivals, and Lady Beauclerc and Joanna had worked the seats of a dozen high-backed chairs, and embroidered pocket-handkerchiefs, besides knitting more stockings than Mrs. Pemberton could dispense to the poor of Ashton village.

There was nothing particularly attractive in Joanna. The clergyman, one of the old school, who spent a great part of his time in his study, thought of her when he thought at all, as "that poor little, plain granddaughter of Lady Beauclerc," and beyond a formal "Good morning, my dear," had scarcely ever spoken to her.

Thus conversation, or interchange of thought, or the little ripple of small talk, was unknown to Joanna. The dread of meeting all the family at tea reached its height when the bell rang, as it did in a few minutes, and a tap at the door was followed by Gertrude's appearance.

"Will you come down, please, to tea ? I will show you the way."

Joanna emerged from her room only to fall upon

the two little girls who were ready with their "How do you do?" and faces uplifted for a kiss. But Joanna's shyness only increased, and Sibyl's wondering eyes were raised curiously to the face which was so unresponsive. She raced downstairs before her sisters, and confided in a whisper to her Aunt Helen that she did not like the new girl at all.

Never in her life before, had Joanna sat down to table with such a large party. And although her presence subdued the spirits of the children somewhat, still there was enough talking to bewilder one who had been accustomed to the silence of Ashton Court.

"Did you say you were fifteen?" Aunt Helen asked. "Then you are Cecil's age. When is your birthday?"

"I was fifteen on the 29th of September."

"Oh! then Cecil is older. She will be sixteen in January, and Gertrude will be fifteen in November, there is only ten months between them, and Oswald will be seventeen in March. All the birthdays are very near together."

"Except mine and Charlie's," Daisy said.

"Yes, dear; but you know there were several little brothers and sisters between you and Charlie, who are gone to heaven," Aunt Helen added, in the phrase commonly used about our dead.

"My dear, you are eating nothing. Will you have an egg or a cutlet?"

Poor Joanna, when thus addressed, could only repeat, "No, thank you," for the dozenth time, and was at last relieved from Miss Prendergast's well meant attentions by a diversion towards Dr. Prendergast, who came in late and tired, and about whose tea Miss Prendergast busied herself.

"I have a lesson to finish," Gertrude said when they were going upstairs; "will you come into the schoolroom with me, and I will show you all the books, and tell you what we have to do?"

Joanna paused when they reached the door.

"I am so tired, please may I go to bed?"

"Oh, yes, of course; and I will come with you. I daresay Sarah has unpacked your things; but had not you better wait and bid Aunt Helen and the others good-night?"

"Must I?"

"Oh, no; if you don't wish, never mind. I daresay Aunt Helen will come and look after you; come along."

Sarah was, as Gertrude had predicted, unpacking the boxes which contained Joanna's wardrobe. It was not an extensive one, and had been furnished by the leading shop in Minsterholme. The black dresses, trimmed with crape, were made upon the

same pattern Joanna had worn for years, and everything looked too large and too heavy for her small figure.

Sarah had soon finished, and offered to render any further assistance.

"Oh, I'll stop, Sarah, you may go," Gertrude said. "Come, Joanna, shall I brush your hair? How short it is! but it must save a great deal of trouble."

"Thank you, I can do everything for myself," Joanna said.

"You want to get rid of me. Very well; good-night. Is that your Bible? Is it not very old?"

"Yes; it was my mother's," Joanna said.

Gertrude took it up and carelessly turned the pages.

"Evelyn Mary Hope," she read, "Christmas, 1849. What a pretty name! It is a pity you were not called Evelyn; why were you called Joanna?"

"It was grandmamma's name, and I suppose that was the reason."

"It is a very ugly name," Gertrude said.

"Is it? I never thought about it," was the rejoinder.

"How odd! I am sure I should think of it if I had it, and try to improve upon it. Have you only one name?"

"Yes, I have another; but I am sure you will

think that worse. I was born on the 29th of September, and that is why I had it."

"Yes, I know—Michaelmas goose day ; surely you are not called Michael, that would be awful?"

Joanna did not laugh, but said, "No ; my second name is Angela. You know the day is called in the Prayer-book the festival of St. Michael and All Angels ; that must have been the reason I had the name."

"Well, really," said Gertrude, "I think Angela is a much prettier name than Joanna. I vote we change it. You shall be Angela till you go back to Ashton."

"Good-night," said Joanna gravely, holding out her hand.

"Good-night ; I see you want me to go. Miss Scales comes at ten to-morrow, and I have a music lesson at half-past eight from Mr. Beddow. Will you learn music?"

"I don't know : it will be as Dr. Prendergast wishes, I suppose." And again there was a hopeless good-night from Joanna.

At last she was alone ; but suddenly returning, Gertrude's head appeared at the door again, and she said—

"You are to come to tea at the Vicarage with us to-morrow ? Mr. Hastings has a sister who is

come to live with him. She is awfully pretty, and good too."

This was the last word as far as Gertrude was concerned ; but Joanna had other visitors. First came Miss Prendergast, solicitous for her comfort, and full of fussy attentions : worse still, full of many words. Then came Cecil, who was quiet, but showed her disappointment that Joanna would not respond to her. And lastly Sarah, who bustled about the room for ten minutes, and reported to the servants, that "of all queer little things this Miss Coningham was the queerest. There was something quite uncanny in her eyes, they were as black as sloes in the hedges ; and she spoke that low, it was hard work to understand a word she said."

As Joanna tossed uneasily on her bed, and felt her eyes get more widely open every minute, she was discussed in all her bearings in the schoolroom, the drawing-room, and the kitchen, and the general verdict was not, I fear, a very favourable one.

A sense of desolation pressed upon her, and it was not till the Minster clock had chimed twelve that she fell into the dreamless sleep seldom denied to youth, however great the pressure of sorrow or trouble may be.

The next day was a weary one to Joanna ; she sat in the schoolroom while Cecil and Gertrude did

their morning's work with Miss Scales, and her proud spirit chafed at the idea of showing her ignorance to her young companions.

Gertrude's blotted essay on the unhappy Charles I. she heard read and criticised, hopeless of ever writing anything as good. Then Cecil's analysis of twelve lines of Milton, and her difficult sum in Colenso's Arithmetic, seemed to her profound in the extreme.

Dictation followed, which Cecil wrote rapidly, and almost without a fault; and then when the business of the morning was concluded, Miss Scales turned to Joanna, and asked her if she had been accustomed to this kind of work.

"I know nothing," was the answer, in the low suppressed voice, which had no ring of youth in it. "I had better begin quite easy things."

"Oh, I daresay you will get on very well, Miss Coninghame. Perhaps you will get a book and kindly write the same essay for Monday that these girls will write for me. A very easy one on the character of James II. Then perhaps you will prepare the same lesson in geography, and draw a map of Portugal. We read poetry on Mondays, instead of doing arithmetic, and Cecil will show you the place in Wordsworth's 'Excursion.' She is also learning 'The Happy Warrior,' and you will like

to join her. Now we will read a chapter of Freeman's 'Norman Conquest.' Will you begin, Miss Coningham? It is a charming book Dr. Prendergast brought in the other day, and you will enjoy it, I am sure."

Poor Joanna looked like anything but enjoyment as she began to read in a low monotonous tone, very slowly, and without the least brightness or apparent understanding. Gertrude wrote on a slip of paper, "Don't read like a bee in a bottle," and put it under Joanna's eye. She coloured crimson, and stopped.

"Go on, my dear."

"I had rather not," was the reply; and Miss Scales, wishing to spare her as much as possible the first day, said :

"Cecil, go on where Miss Coningham stopped; and Gertrude, do pray be attentive; you will not be able to answer a single question if you are so giddy. What is that paper? Give it to me."

Gertrude rolled up a little bit of paper tightly in her hand, and said, "Nothing."

"I insist upon seeing it; hand it to me."

The little roll was reluctantly given up. Miss Scales looked at it, and then tearing it into minute atoms, said, "I see no fun in things of this kind. I should have thought M. Le Bras's complaint to

Dr. Prendergast would have been a lesson not so soon forgotten."

Gertrude coloured, "Tell-tale!" she said, under her breath, to Cecil. "I would not be so mean for worlds."

At last the long morning came to a close ; Miss Scales departed, and Gertrude went to practise, while Cecil began to sketch in the outline of a child's head in chalk ; while Joanna, having borrowed the Wordsworth, sat down to contemplate "The Happy Warrior," sitting stiffly at the table, with the book before her. Lady Beauclerc had never allowed any lounging, and an elbow on the table was never dreamed of at Ashton Court.

"Are we to learn all this for Monday, can you tell me?" Joanna asked presently.

"No ; half of it, I think Miss Scales said ; but there are no full-stops, so you can count the lines."

"I shall never learn it," Joanna said in an undertone ; and then with a sigh she began to read it over :

"Who is the Happy Warrior? Who is he
Whom every man in arms should wish to be?
It is the generous spirit, who, when brought
Among the tasks of real life, hath wrought
Upon the place that pleased his childish thought,
Whose high endeavours are an inward light,
That make the path before him always bright ;

Who, with a natural instinct to discern
What knowledge can perform, is diligent to learn,
Abides by this resolve, and stops not there,
But makes his moral being his prime care ;
Who, doomed to go in company with pain,
And fear, and bloodshed, miserable train,
Turns his necessity to glorious gain."

So far did poor Joanna read, over and over again, but without any grasp of the meaning of what she read.

Cecil was called away by Miss Prendergast, and she was left alone ; but she did not relax her position, and stared at the words before her, half hopelessly, half anxiously. After a few minutes the door opened, and Oswald came in. The boy looked pale and tired, and threw himself back in the large worn armchair, facing Joanna.

She looked up when he came in, but she did not speak nor smile, and casting down her eyes on the book again, she remained immovable.

Oswald looked at her curiously, and tried to make up his mind about her. She was so unlike his sisters, so unlike Lottie and May Cuthbert, so unlike any girl he had ever seen.

"Certainly no one could call her pretty," he thought ; "but then no one could call her plain, except, indeed, stupid people like Gertrude and Charlie."

The small head with its crop of raven hair, tied back with a band of black ribbon, was well set upon her shoulders, and long curled lashes shadowed those dark eyes. The nose was straight and short, and the mouth delicately cut ; but Joanna's complexion was muddy and very brown, and her figure full of angles, while the plainly made black dress, loaded with crape folds, was most unbecoming, and was not relieved by any rim of white at throat or wrists.

A silence, broken only by noises on the road, boys whistling and calling to each other as they came out of school, was uninterrupted for ten minutes. Then a springing step was heard in the corridor, and Gertrude came in with a look in her eyes, which her brothers and Cecil said always meant mischief.

CHAPTER III.

LESSONS OF LIFE.

“COME, Joanna, I have finished practising, and I want to take you into the garden. We have a garden, though you may not believe it ; Oswald walks up and down there learning his lessons, don't you Oswald ? Daisy and Sibyl carry their dolls there in state ; and I know the way to climb the old apple-tree, and how to knock down the best mulberries. To be sure there are a great many snails, and the leaves are riddled with holes as soon as they come out in the spring ; but that affords a pleasing variety. The mulberry-tree is a grand possession ; it has fed many thousands of silkworms, kept by College boys. If only the silk that has been made out of that tree could be spun, it would be a fortune to somebody. But really, Joanna, I must beg you to shut up that old book, you will get quite moped if you sit in that position any longer. I beseech you

move or do something, and don't sit like patience on a monument ; here goes !" and Gertrude took up the book, shut it, and danced away with it.

"Give me the book, please," Joanna said.

"I shall do no such thing. I shall deposit it on the highest shelf," and Gertrude tossed the poor Wordsworth up to the top of some big dusty gazetteers which crowned the schoolroom shelves.

"My dear," she continued, "you are coming with me into the garden till dinner-time. M. Le Bras will be here at a quarter to three ; and so much the worse for me. Did you know I could make rhymes—verses—poetry, and that I am going to dedicate my first volume to you? Now then ;" and Gertrude put her arm round Joanna, and whirled her off her chair towards the door.

"I hate. it," Joanna said passionately. "Leave me alone!"

"Ah! but you must not say hate. When I asked old Le Bras what the French said when they hated any one, he replied, '*Je n'aime pas, c'est assez.*'"

But Joanna was in sober earnest now, she struggled to free herself from Gertrude's grasp, and succeeded, much to Oswald's satisfaction, who was glad to see Gertrude had found her match. Still even he was almost frightened at the flashing eyes which met

his, as Joanna said to him, "Will you get that book for me? I can't reach it."

Gertrude tried to prevent her brother from doing what Joanna asked, but he was too quick for her. He jumped up on a chair, and had the book in a moment, giving it to Joanna, and saying, "I am sorry you have so soon to learn what a tease Truda is."

Joanna reseated herself without a word; and Charlie's voice calling Gertrude, made a diversion in her favour, for her tormentor left the room. Again Oswald began his scrutiny, and very soon he saw two big tears falling upon the open book, and then they were quietly wiped away. Oswald had less of shyness and reserve than many boys of his age, and he had a dash of chivalry in his composition, which won for him the allegiance of those who were weaker and younger than himself.

This chivalrous feeling was moved at the sight of a lonely friendless girl, made a butt for Truda's thoughtless banter, and anxious to show he felt for her, he said :

"Is that hard to learn? Wordsworth is a tough old fellow to deal with, though he seems so easy at first sight. Ah," he said, "I see," rising and looking over Joanna's shoulder, "'The Happy Warrior.' Yes; that is difficult to remember: there are so

few places to halt at ; but it is a grand thing all the same. I will hear you say the first six lines if you like, if you think that will help you."

The expression of kindly interest touched Joanna, and she had great difficulty in repressing her sobs.

"Look here," said Oswald kindly ; "I will try if I can remember the first part, and say it to you. My memory is not what it was ; but I learned this thing three years ago."

If his memory was not what it was, it was still very good ; and he went glibly through the piece, with only an occasional stumble.

"Thank you," said Joanna. "It seems easier now. I am a dreadful dunce, and your sisters are so clever."

"Nonsense ; I am sure they are not. Cecil is a good girl, and works hard ; but Gertrude only gets a smattering of everything. She is an awful bother ; but she does not mean amiss, so you must not care about her ; and if you are ever in any scrape and I can help you, mind you tell me. You will be all right at your lessons when you get into the way of it. Now that is the dinner-bell, and I must cut it, or Aunt Helen will be pitching into me for rough hair ; she has a mania about rough hair."

Gertrude got over her apology to M. Le Bras in

the hall, and was in high spirits at the lesson in consequence.

Lottie and May Cuthbert overwhelmed Joanna with attentions, and lent her a pen for her dictation, in which she became entangled in a hopeless maze, before M. Le Bras had reached the end of the second sentence. Lottie, who sat next her, made a variety of cabalistic signs, but Joanna only grew more and more confused. Then came her turn to read. If Freeman's "Norman Conquest" had been a severe ordeal, how much more was "Madame Thérèse"? Joanna's French and M. Le Bras's French were like two different tongues, and certainly the ripple of the rivers of the country which is said to have its echo in its language was not heard in Joanna's hard, uncompromising syllables, with their jerking termination.

Joanna's misery was intense. She felt that Gertrude was hiding her laughter; and M. Le Bras shrugged his shoulders as he corrected every third word. Then came the arrangement for the German for the next lesson; and Joanna had to read the alphabet over to M. Le Bras, and try to repeat after him a few easy words. As soon as the lesson was over, Gertrude raced upstairs to find Charlie, leaving Joanna and the Cuthberts with Cecil in the dining-room.

Lottie Cuthbert had soft, insinuating manners when she wished to please, and she did very much wish to please Joanna. I hardly know why ; but some foolish idea that her position was socially superior, and that one day she would be mistress of Ashton Court, and then certainly a desirable friend, possessed her. This touch of real, right-down worldly policy is not common with the young ; let us be thankful that it is not ; nothing is more distasteful to all right-thinking people. Poor Joanna, who had never had any companions of her own age, was somewhat taken with Lottie, who put her arm in hers caressingly, and said she hoped they should have a walk together soon. "Could Joanna come now?"

"We are going to the Vicarage to tea," Cecil interposed ; "but of course if Joanna likes, there is time before. Mrs. Stuart did not ask us till six o'clock."

Joanna decided to go, and set off with her two companions, who only faintly asked Cecil if she were coming with them.

"No, thank you," said Cecil coldly ; "I have to pay a visit with Aunt Helen this afternoon."

"It is such a pity," Lottie said, as the three girls left the house, "that Cecil is so brought forward. Girls ought to be either in the schoolroom or out of

it ; and Cecil is not really to come out till she is eighteen. Don't you find Gertrude dreadfully rough ? She is quite noted for it here."

"I have only been with the Prendergasts one day," said Joanna evasively ; "but I don't like Gertrude."

"I should think not," said May ; "she is such a plague. Mamma says she would not have us like her for the world."

At this point the sound of feet coming rapidly behind them was heard, and Gertrude and Charlie overtook them.

"We are going to watch the football practice ; come on !" Gertrude said.

"No ; we must not come," Lottie replied. "Mamma does not like our going down to the College field alone."

"Well, you won't be alone. Charlie and I can look after you."

"What is football ?" asked Joanna.

"O you dear innocent child !" exclaimed Gertrude. "It is football, and nothing else ; a ball that is kicked about and scrummaged over ; but come with us, and you shall see."

"No, thank you," said Joanna ; "I don't wish to come."

And Gertrude, with a quick "And I am sure I

don't want you," disappeared with Charlie down a by-street which led to the College playground.

Joanna was left with her two new friends, who continued to enlighten her as to the inhabitants of Minsterholme, who were "nice" and who were "not quite nice;" and Joanna's mind, open to receive impressions, retained all that was said. When at last the Cuthberts left her at the door of the Priory, she was very tired, and crept up to the schoolroom. She found it empty; and taking off her hat and jacket, and curling herself up in the arm-chair, fell asleep.

Meanwhile Miss Prendergast and Cecil had come home, and Aunt Helen heard, to her astonishment, that Joanna had gone a walk with the Cuthberts. She ought to have been consulted; she was sure Dr. Prendergast would not like it; and it was very pushing and forward of the two girls to propose it. Cecil was very wrong to allow it. Then Gertrude had gone down to the football with Charlie, and that was a thing she disliked. So Miss Prendergast fumed for a few minutes, and then forgot her grievances over a good cup of afternoon tea; and the bright fire, and the appearance of Daisy and Sibyl in all their pretty childish grace, helped her to dismiss uncomfortable thoughts. Things did not go deep with Miss Prendergast. People who can talk

out their cares and vexations soon forget them ; it is the silent brooding natures to whom the thorns and briers of life are such a perpetual grievance, a burden too heavy to be borne. Gertrude came home about five o'clock ; her usually high spirits seemed to have failed her, and she was abstracted and restless ; scarcely hearing her aunt's expressions of displeasure that she had gone to the football with Charlie, and throwing down her hat on the drawing-room sofa, in defiance of established rule.

"And did Charlie come in with you?" Miss Prendergast asked.

"No ; I walked back alone. Only from the school gates," she added.

"You ought not to have done so ; it is getting quite dark ; it is the last time I shall think of allowing it," Aunt Helen said. "And pray, where is Charlie?"

"He is with one of the College boys ; I suppose there is no harm in that !" And yet, as she spoke, Gertrude knew there was harm. Weston was a boy who did not stand well in the estimation of the school. He had narrowly escaped being expelled for dishonourable conduct the last term, and Gertrude had heard enough that afternoon to quicken her fears about her brother's intimacy with him. She caught some words about six shillings being

only half a debt, and that the other six must be forthcoming, or he should go direct to Dr. Prendergast. Charlie's rejoinder she lost, as just by the school gates her brother asked her to run on home, and he would follow.

"Does she twig?" were the last words she heard from Weston, and she felt sure the six shillings she had placed under the tin box had found their way into Weston's pocket.

"What dresses are we to put on to go to the Vicarage?" Gertrude asked.

"Your blue and white-striped baréges ; they will do quite well."

"And is Joanna to be told to change her dress?"

"Well, really," Miss Prendergast said, "all her dresses are so much alike, so completely like shop-made ones, loaded with crape, and yet looking nothing, and cut in such an old-fashioned way. Of course in time I must get her properly dressed ; but it is difficult to manage. How did you get on with her to-day, girls?"

"We have not got on ; we have stood still," said Gertrude. "She is horribly ignorant, Aunt Helen ; and so proud she does not seem to like to be helped or shown anything, except by Lottie and May Cuthbert ; she is quite taken in by them."

"Well, we were as bad once," Cecil said. "I

remember how devoted you were to Lottie, Gertrude ; and you used to provoke me by kissing her before and after the French lesson."

"I shall not provoke you in that way again, anyhow," said Gertrude. "Somebody must go and look after Joanna."

Sibyl volunteered to find her, and after a short absence, returned to say that Joanna was asleep in the arm-chair in the schoolroom, and that Oswald was there doing his Greek, and said no one was to wake her.

"What nonsense," said Gertrude. "I shall go and poke her up, fast enough."

"Stop, Gertrude ;" but Gertrude seemed to recover her energy at once, and was off like an arrow from a bow. "She will make Joanna hate us all," Cecil said ; "she does nothing but tease and worry her."

Miss Prendergast was beginning her usual "I must really appeal to your father," when Oswald came in, holding Gertrude tightly by the wrist.

"Let me go, I say, Oswald."

"No ; I will not let you go. Aunt Helen, surely this poor girl, who has scarcely been in the house a day, is not to have her life made a misery to her by Gertrude. Will you interfere ? Will you stop it ? It is so mean and so—unchivalrous."

"You absurd boy!" said Gertrude. "As if I cared for you. It is more unchivalrous, as you call it, to hold my arm till it will be black and blue."

"Really, Oswald," Cecil said, "I think it is no business of yours. If Joanna is to go to the Vicarage, she must get ready. So there is an end of it. I shall go and call her myself."

"Be gentle, Cecil; do pray be gentle. It is odd of her to go to sleep in the arm-chair, though. Dear me!" exclaimed Miss Prendergast; "I am afraid this plan will not answer. If you were all amenable and pleasant it would be different. But you are all so wilful and headstrong——"

"Look at my arm, Aunt Helen," said Gertrude, who really must have had unpleasant experience of the strength of Oswald's fingers. "Do you call that a brotherly squeeze?"

"No; it is quite unjustifiable. You had better complain to your father."

That was the last thing Gertrude would ever do; and she contented herself with displaying her arm from under the blue and white barége to poor Joanna in the room at the Vicarage, where the three girls were shown to take off their hats and shawls, saying:

"I have to thank you for that."

"Me!" said Joanna. "What do you mean?"

"What I say. I had proposed to wake you from your slumbers by a wet sponge, only the sponge we wash the slates with, just a friendly dab on your forehead ; but your guardian angel interposed, and was anything but angelic in the way he dragged me downstairs. Don't look so dazed, you must know what I mean."

But Joanna did not know what Gertrude meant, and puzzled over it during tea-time, till she knit her dark eye-brows with the effort, and gave it up at last as hopeless.

The Vicar retired to his study after tea, and the three girls were left with Mrs. Stuart, who had the power—not a common one by any means—of putting those with whom she was brought in contact entirely at their ease. A certain native grace and gentle winning manner, and an entire absence of self-consciousness, characterised Mrs. Stuart ; with no effort, and with no straining after popularity, she made even her enemies to be at peace with her.

Cecil and Gertrude found themselves talking to her as naturally as if they had known her for years ; and they caught eagerly at her offer of a class in St. Mary's Sunday-school.

"I shall like that very much, if papa will let me begin," said Cecil. "I must ask him first."

"Of course ; and I should think you have your own little Sunday-school at home with your two little sisters."

"No ; Aunt Helen considers them her property. I wish she did not ; but Gertrude and I have nothing to do with them—except to love and spoil them," she added.

"You can do the first without the last," Mrs. Stuart said, with a smile. "Indeed, I think to spoil a child is anything but a sign of love."

"They are dear little things," said Gertrude warmly ; "but Cecil is quite right, we have nothing to do with them."

"My dear, that is impossible," Mrs. Stuart said.

"But it is perfectly true," Gertrude continued. "Aunt Helen teaches the children, and takes them out very often, and shows them off at her five o'clock teas, and takes them to church on Sundays."

"We all go to church together," Cecil interposed.

"Well, yes ; but Aunt Helen rules whether Daisy is to go or not, and what hat Sibyl is to wear."

"I understand," Mrs. Stuart said ; "but, my dear Gertrude, we must have 'to do,' as you express it, with every one we live with. No word, and no action, is without its effect on those around us : for no man liveth to himself."

Gertrude's blue eyes were full of interest.

"I see what you mean," she said ; and her little sister Sibyl's wondering look that afternoon when she and Oswald were wrangling in the drawing-room, recurred to her.

"Insensibly but surely we all influence those around us ; it is a very grave thought."

"It is indeed," Cecil said in a low tone ; "but brothers and sisters like us, with no mother, find it very difficult to get on. We have each to look after our own concerns ; and I find it a waste of breath to talk when no one listens."

"Very little good—I had almost said no good—was ever done by talk. It is more what we are than what we say—nay, than what we do—which tells for good or for the reverse. Saint Peter had lived with our Lord for three years in daily intercourse, seen His miracles, heard His wonderful words ; but I always think that what He was in His infinite love and purity and holiness, came first to him with power with that sad reproving look, when He that was reviled, reviled not again, and stood on high above that factious crowd in the sublime beauty of reality."

"Yes ; but who can be like that ?" Gertrude said quickly.

"We may follow His steps afar off; we may learn of Him."

Then, after a pause, Mrs. Stuart said :

"Let us have some music now. Arthur has a very good piano. Come, who will try it? Miss Coningham, can you play something?"

"I!" said Joanna; "I can do nothing." The tone was so hopeless that Mrs. Stuart was quite touched by it.

She saw Joanna was oppressed with shyness, and had thought it kinder to leave her unmolested hitherto.

"You can work beautifully," said Mrs. Stuart; for Joanna, true to early and fixed habits, had produced a piece of fine embroidery which she had begun while sitting by her grandmother's chair at Ashton. "That is really lovely," Mrs. Stuart continued, as she took the work from Joanna's hand and examined it. "I wonder if you would teach me that stitch some day; for I want to send out a box to my old home, with some new work for my school there, and this would delight the elder girls. Their dark fingers are very nearly as clever as yours seem to be. I have a photograph of some of my tawny-coloured children I will show you."

Then Mrs. Stuart brought a book of photographs

of the Mission Church settlement and schools ; and one of the quiet grave where the husband she had so dearly loved rested from his labours. The tone of her whole conversation was new to them all, —almost as new to the two Prendergasts as to Joanna ; and with all the enthusiasm of youth the fair sweet widow was exalted to a very high place in their imagination.

The piano was opened, and Mrs. Stuart sat down and played with all the precision of an accomplished musician. It was like the wakening breath of day-dawn to Joanna's soul as Mrs. Stuart's sweet clear voice sang with infinite feeling the song from the "Elijah :—" "If with all your hearts you truly seek me ,ye shall ever surely find me. Thus saith our God."

How that poor, desolate child's heart, with all its undefined longings, responded to the cry : "O that I knew where I might find Him."

Like the human kindness which Dr. Prendergast had shown her once or twice, like Oswald's defence that morning, so did the tenderness of these words, which told of the sure finding of God, if with all the heart we seek Him, touch Joanna's soul. Again the great tears welled up in her dark eyes, and one by one rolled slowly down her face.

Mrs. Stuart saw, but took no notice ; only there

was a sound of loving sympathy in her voice as she said :

" I am glad you like music, my dear ; and that song is an especial favourite of mine, as my husband loved it so much. Now, if you don't mind, I should like to sing over the hymns for to-morrow. Let us all join."

So the evening passed ; and at nine o'clock Oswald came, and after doing full justice to a nice little supper, he escorted his sisters home. He looked brighter and happier, and Joanna, when he appeared, felt a sort of security which was pleasant to her. On the way to the Priory a boy ran quickly past them. It was Charlie. In his haste he had not seen his sisters, and when Gertrude called him he turned back and joined them.

" Why didn't you come to the Vicarage, Charlie?" Cecil said. " How you smell of smoke, you must have been smoking."

" Well, what harm is there in that, I should like to know ?"

" Papa objects to it," was Cecil's reply ; " and you ought to have been at the Vicarage, and not walking about the streets."

" I have *not* been walking about the streets ; so you are wrong."

And then Charlie fell back by Gertrude's side.

What Mrs. Stuart had said about influence was fresh in her mind, and she felt secretly very uneasy about Charlie. He had altered very much of late, and Gertrude put it all down to his intimacy with Weston.

"I say, Truda," he began, "you won't make a row to-night about this—"

"About what?"

"Why, they need not know I did not come to the Vicarage with Oswald, unless they are told ; we shall all go in together."

"Of course I shan't tell, if that is what you mean, Charlie ; but I do think that horrid boy is doing you no good."

"He is the jolliest fellow that ever breathed, Truda, and you should hear what he says of you ; he admires you awfully, and says Cecil is not half as good-looking."

A little flutter of gratified vanity stirred in Gertrude's heart, but she tried to hide it.

"As if I cared for what he said. I believe he gets money out of you, Charlie, and makes you do things you know are wrong. I hate anything mean and deceitful, and if he teaches you to crib, instead of doing your work, that is quite enough."

"How dare you lecture me ?" said Charlie angrily

"You are the last person to preach ; you should look at home first."

They were at the door of the Priory now, and they all went in together, so that no remark was made on Charlie.

Dr. Prendergast was in the drawing-room, leaning back in his arm-chair, and Aunt Helen sat at her little davenport writing. She had an immense correspondence, and her pen was as fluent as her tongue.

"Mrs. Stuart is the most delightful person, papa," Gertrude said, perching on the arm of her father's chair, and stroking his head ; "so pretty and so good."

"Yes ; I remember seeing her before she went out to India. She was a lovely girl, and turned every one's head in those days. Mr. Hastings had just got this living, and she came to see him ; then soon after we heard she was married. Poor Stuart was a very able man, and risked his life out in that remote part of India where the Mission Station was placed ; such men are not so plentiful that we can afford to lose them."

While he was speaking Joanna stood apart, and Dr. Prendergast held out his hand to her, and said :

"Well, my dear, I hope you have had a pleasant

evening ; we must have a little talk together to-morrow. You must tell me how you get on, and if there is anything you would like to have. Good-night, then, if you are going ;" and Dr. Prendergast stroked her head kindly, and repeated "Good-night, my child."

Joanna went away, and Charlie and Gertrude followed almost immediately.

"Well, Cecil, how do you get on with her?" Dr. Prendergast asked.

"Nobody could get on with her, papa, she is like a block of wood ; but still she gives herself no airs, and that is a comfort."

"Poor thing !" said Oswald ; "she is likely to wish herself at Jericho before she is a month older. I am sure she may safely hate us all."

"Nonsense, Oswald," said Aunt Helen, who had kept up a fire of small-talk all this time, and now plunged headlong into the discussion. "Joanna is treated with every possible consideration ; her bedroom is our only spare room, and the chintzes are quite new. Then there is the dressing-room. Oh ! indeed I think she can have nothing to complain of."

"Who said she complained?" Oswald broke in impatiently ; "but I should rather think Gertrude ought to be prevented from bullying her, as she has

done to-day. If no one takes it in hand, I shall."

"You took Gertrude's arm in hand," said Cecil, "if I may judge by the bruise on it."

As Cecil spoke, and before there was time for any one to rejoin, a piercing shriek rang through the house, followed by another and another.

Every one in the drawing-room rushed to the door in the greatest alarm, and there was a sound of voices and confusion, and then a heavy fall.

Dr. Prendergast and Oswald ran upstairs to the place from whence the sounds came, and, pale and trembling, Cecil and Miss Prendergast followed.

"What is it? Who is it?"

"Oh, papa, I never thought it would frighten her. Oh! is she dead?" Gertrude cried in agony.

Dr. Prendergast pushed Gertrude aside, and lifting Joanna in his arms, strode downstairs again, and took her to his consulting-room, and laid her on the couch there. The children had never seen their father's face so stern and terrible in its expression.

"Go away," he said to Gertrude, who followed him, "let me see no more of you to-night; if this is your work, may God forgive you."

"I put her up to it, father"—it was Charlie's voice;

"it was all done in a moment, we never thought of any harm."

"I can't get these horrid things off. Oh! some one, help me, please," Gertrude pleaded, as she tugged at a string which tied a long white sheet round her neck.

"You had better go upstairs again, Truda," said Cecil, who was now calm and collected, and helping her father to do all that was necessary.

"Yes, go away," said Oswald; "no one wants you here."

Poor Gertrude was a pitiable object as she dragged her heavy drapery behind her, and stumbled upstairs. Even Charlie deserted her, and stood just outside the door, unnoticed in the general panic.

Aunt Helen talked in an excited, agitated way. Oswald in vain tried to get her to leave the scene of action; and meanwhile there was no change in the stiff, rigid, upturned face before them.

"What was it?" Dr. Prendergast asked of Oswald, as he held a glass for his father.

"Gertrude dressed up to imitate Joan d'Arc, and went into the dressing-room from the door leading into the corridor."

"Yes; that was it," said Sarah, who was allowed to remain. "Yes; and she looked frightful with a

handkerchief bound over her face. Oh dear ! it is awful to look at that poor child."

Long they watched, and Dr. Prendergast tried every means to restore Joanna ; but it seemed in vain. At last there was a flutter of the eyelids and a sigh ; then a shudder as consciousness came back, and Joanna's dark eyes opened.

"I saw, I saw," she began, "something terrible in the glass in the room. Pray tell me what it was ; pray——" and Joanna clutched Dr. Prendergast's arm convulsively.

"My dear child, it was nothing but one of these children dressed up. It was a foolish trick—and a wicked one too," he added in an undertone. "But you feel better now ?"

"Yes. I am very sorry I was so—so——"

"We won't talk of it any more now ; drink this, and then I will carry you up to bed, and you will, I hope, sleep soundly."

"Not in that room, please," Joanna said ; "not alone there."

"No, not alone ; Cecil will come and sleep with you."

"Perhaps she won't like to come," Joanna said in a pathetic tone.

"Oh yes, I shall very much," said Cecil kindly ; and stooping down she kissed Joanna's forehead.

"Then let us go at once. Why, it is very late, and we ought all to be asleep," said Dr. Prendergast. "No," as Joanna struggled to her feet; "I mean to carry you."

"My head aches rather. Did I fall down?"

"Yes; and a pretty hard thud you had upon the floor of the corridor. Now, then——"

"Good-night!" Joanna said to Oswald, as she passed him.

"Good-night! I hope you will soon feel better, and have a good night."

Charlie emerged from his hiding-place as the procession passed upstairs. He felt very guilty and uneasy, and was anxious to creep up to his room unnoticed. As he passed the door of his sister's room, he saw a heap of white lying there, and heard heavy sobs.

"Get up, Gertrude—she is all right; get up and go to bed. Cecil is going to sleep with her. Who could have thought she would have gone off in that way?"

"But, Charlie," Gertrude said, "if she should die!"

"Nonsense; I tell you she is all right. Papa has carried her up to bed, and she will do now."

"But, Charlie, I heard one of the maids say she would go mad. O Charlie! say she won't go mad."

Gertrude's agitation was now so great that Charlie was frightened.

"Here," he said, "pray get up and let me get off that awful sheet. Why, you are half-choked. Pray get up and go to bed. It was my fault more than yours; I told papa so. Now do go to bed, Gertrude; you will be ill if you cry like this. Here is Cecil."

Cecil had come to her room to undress, and seeing her sister crouched up by the door, she said in a cold hard voice:

"There is no use in crying till you are ill. Don't lie here and make another scene."

"I want papa, Cecil," Gertrude sobbed out.

"You had better not see him to-night; he is fearfully angry. You know, Gertrude, some people have died of fright like this, and thousands have lost their senses."

This was poor comfort; but Gertrude stumbled to her feet, and at last succeeded in freeing herself from the disguise which had wrought so much mischief.

Cecil got through her own undressing as quickly as possible, and then saying good-night, left her sister and went to Joanna's room.

"Oh that papa would come!" Gertrude moaned.
"Oh that some one would say they forgave me!"

Then the poor child knelt down and tried to pray. I do not know that any words were uttered, but I think her wild undisciplined heart in this distress sought God as it had never sought Him before. She tossed wearily on the bed long after the house was quiet. Once she woke to hear her father's footsteps on the stairs. He had come up to look at Joanna and assure himself of her condition.

It is no wonder that Dr. Prendergast was troubled and uneasy, for a doctor knows better than any one else the dangerous consequences of what are called practical jokes. Many a young life has been shattered by this means ; many a nervous sensitive boy or girl made miserable for life.

And that one of his own children should thus try to frighten a friendless girl on the second night of her residence with them, filled Dr. Prendergast with sorrow and indignation.

CHAPTER IV.

GERTRUDE'S TROUBLES.

SUNDAY morning dawned bright and clear, and Cecil was awoke by Joanna's voice.

"Cecil!"

"Yes; I am here."

"I am quite well now, and I am sorry I made so much trouble."

"You did not make it; those who did make it ought to be ashamed of themselves."

Cecil was sleepy, and turning round was soon dreaming again.

But Joanna was wide awake, and was presently aware that some one was in the room moving about. Her heart beat fast, and a shudder, she could not restrain, passed over her. But the timid, uncertain steps approached nearer; and Gertrude stood by the bed, her eyes swollen with crying, dark rings round them, and her rosy lips quivering with emotion.

Joanna's great dark eyes looked unnaturally large as she gazed up at Gertrude.

"Oh, don't be frightened," she said ; "Joanna, I am so very sorry ; I only want to know how you are."

Joanna did not speak, and Gertrude went on. "I dressed up for fun ; I never meant to frighten you, or at least to make you ill. Oh, say you are better, and papa, papa, that is the worst ; he is so angry with me, Cecil says. Please speak to me, Joanna."

There came a tender light over the white face which lay upon the pillow like the sun breaking out from behind clouds, and then Joanna said :

"Don't be sorry ; it is all over now, and I am not ill."

"Kiss me then," said poor Gertrude ; "and don't tell Cecil I came, she will be so angry. Take care you don't wake her ;" for Joanna raised herself, and flinging her arms round Gertrude's neck, the two girls exchanged an embrace which was the most fervent one of them at least had ever known.

Gertrude's spirits always rose very quickly when a weight was taken off them, and she went back to her room with a rush and a spring more like herself.

Dr. Prendergast came up at eight o'clock, felt Joanna's pulse, and ordered that she should keep

quiet till the afternoon, and that then he might allow her to get up to tea.

But she was to lie still and not to attempt to read, but sleep if she could. The doctor pulled down the blinds and opened the window to admit the fresh air, when Joanna called him.

"Please do not be angry with Gertrude about last night," she said. "She is very sorry I was frightened, and——"

"My dear, Gertrude must be taught to control herself better, and I must show her the danger of such foolish and absurd tricks. Now do not talk any more about this, but try to dismiss it from your mind like a good child."

Gertrude knew when she was sent for to her father's study before breakfast that it was no light matter. Dr. Prendergast did not often reprove his children; but when he did, what he said was always very much to the point. He did not inveigh against practical jokes as vulgar and second rate, as Aunt Helen had done, in one long stream which seemed to have neither beginning nor end; but he represented to her in a few forcible words the risk she had run of permanently injuring Joanna, and that such shocks to sensitive and finely-strung nerves in youth were sometimes never recovered. "I do not say it will be so in this instance," Dr.

Prendergast said ; " though I had the gravest fears last night. Thank God these fears are not realised, and I hope in time the effects of this may pass away. But," he continued, " I could not have believed my Truda would have set herself to annoy and worry a poor friendless girl, who is a perfect stranger amongst us all, and who has led a lonely desolate life, with none of the joys of childhood in it which you have known."

" Papa," Gertrude said, " I will try to make up for it now ; I will indeed. I never thought Joanna would mind ; for she seemed so indifferent."

" You must learn not to jump at conclusions, Gertrude. I believe Joanna is anything but indifferent ; indeed, I should say her feelings were very strong and very deep. I have already spoken to Charlie, and I am afraid he is not as much impressed with his fault as I wish him to be. I am very anxious about Charlie, you seem to be his chief friend, and I do trust, my dear, you will use your influence to make him more diligent at school, and more attentive to our wishes at home."

Gertrude fidgeted and felt uncomfortable. She did not think Charlie was doing well, and the six shillings she had lent him, and the many times she had covered his late return from preparation rose before her. But it was impossible to say anything

just then to her father, only she would let Charlie know that he could have no more money, and that she would never again aid and abet him in coming in late. For the remembrance of the subterfuge about the Vicarage, the night before, hung heavy on her heart.

She had no right to tell tales of her brother, she argued ; but was she right, could she be right, to see him going wrong without trying to help him to break off from anything that was injuring him ? Charlie had always been thought so outspoken and honest—was it possible that he could grow deceitful and underhand ?

Dr. Prendergast did not say much more to Gertrude beyond the assurance of the forgiveness she sought for ; but he added, he must do something to mark his sense of displeasure, for the sake of the others ; and therefore he had agreed with Aunt Helen that neither Gertrude nor Charlie should join any of the family at meals for that day, and he hoped the lesson would be remembered.

“ Papa would never have thought of such a stupid punishment, as if we were babies,” Gertrude said to Charlie. “ Aunt Helen put him up to it.”

“ I think it will be rather fun for you and me to have our meals together in the school-room,” Charlie said.


"I don't feel in the mood for fun to-day, Charlie," was the answer ; and while Gertrude was eating her roll and drinking her coffee her eyes were full of thoughtful concern very unusual to her. Charlie hummed and whistled, and went singing upstairs to get ready for church, when Oswald called out to him to stop.

"Do hold that row ! Don't you know the house is to be kept quiet ?"

"Mind your own business," was the reply ; "I shall sing if I like."

"I cannot think what has changed Charlie so much lately," Cecil said, as she and Oswald were walking to church. "He is so disagreeable and I don't believe he is in the least bit sorry for all that commotion he made last night. He set Gertrude up to it ; and she will do anything she thinks will make a sensation and bother."

Oswald said nothing ; and at that moment they were overtaken by Lottie and May Cuthbert and an elder sister, from whom they had, poor children ! learned a good many little shuffling ways and silly airs. Caroline Cuthbert at one time had been a dear friend of Cecil. She was just enough older to make Cecil feel in a way flattered by her notice. She was "out ;" she dined at the houses of the Minsterholme celebrities when her mother was



unable to do so, and from ill health this was frequently the case. For the last few months, however, Carrie had been engrossed with other intimacies, and had liked spending days in the country at the house of a gentlemen, whose daughter it was wise to cultivate.

Carrie now greeted Cecil cordially, and began to expatiate on the charming walk the children, as Lottie and May were called, had had with Joanna the evening before ; adding that mamma hoped she and the two Prendergasts would take a walk with them the next afternoon and return to tea. Cecil was declining rather coldly and stiffly when, all unperceived, she found Sibyl had joined her.

"Where is Joanna?" Lottie exclaimed. "Is she behind with Gertrude?"

"Joanna is ill in bed," the child said. "There is to be no noise in the house, papa says ; and we must not run up and down the stairs near her room."

"Ill in bed ! Why she was quite well yesterday. What is the matter with her ?"

Sibyl was not quite sure herself what was the matter. She was dimly conscious that there was some mystery, and remembered waking up, and hearing an unusual noise in the house the night before. One of the servants had said something

about a fit, and Sibyl thought that was a very awful calamity. She remembered hearing that Daisy had a convulsive fit when she was a baby, and Sarah had said that she was never such a strong child again. Cecil's warning glances were unheeded, and just as they had reached the church porch Sibyl said solemnly :

"Joanna has had a fit."

"Nonsense, Sibyl," said Cecil sharply ; "you know nothing about it."

But the Cuthberts were in possession of the fact, and the news circulated through the little community, taking various forms as it was told from one to another, but leaving an impression upon the minds of many that Joanna was subject to epileptic fits, and that her intellect was weak, which of course satisfactorily accounted for Lady Beauclerc wishing to place her in the hands of a medical man.

Dr. Prendergast did not relax his vigilance over Joanna for several days. He forbade all excitement, and Lottie and May Cuthbert were not admitted to her room when they called to inquire for her. A startled look in Joanna's eyes at times and quick-coming breath were signs which the doctor's eye was too keen to overlook.

He was surprised at the eagerness with which

Joanna pleaded to go into the school-room again ; and there was something pathetic in the way in which she said, "I am so backward ; I know nothing ; and I have no time to lose."

"There is plenty of time before you, my dear," Dr. Prendergast said. "I have no doubt you have excellent abilities which will soon help you to succeed. You write a very good hand, I see," he added, looking down upon a sheet of paper, headed, "The Happy Warrior." "I wish Gertrude could write as well."

"Gradmamma made me write so many copies," Joanna said simply. "That is why I write such a round hand."

"It is a very clear hand ; but what on earth makes you copy 'The Happy Warrior' ?"

"Miss Scales gave it to us to learn on Saturday, and I found it so hard that I thought it would help me to understand it if I wrote it out."

"Well, don't tire yourself, my dear, and then you will be ready for your lessons very soon."

When on the third day Joanna again appeared in the school-room, she was conscious of a change in Gertrude's manner. And, indeed, from that day forward I do not think Gertrude, in the wildest flow of spirits, ever wilfully did anything which might hurt Joanna's feelings or annoy her. Mrs.

Stuart came one afternoon late, and was shown into the drawing-room where Joanna and Gertrude were sitting together on the sofa. Gertrude's bright sunny face seemed to catch all the firelight, and Joanna was but dimly seen.

"You will know it very soon, Joan. Now put it away."

"I hope I am not disturbing you," Mrs. Stuart said.

"Oh, no; we are only hearing each other our lessons."

"I am sorry to hear you have been ill. It was a bad beginning for your life here. I hope you are better, my dear," Mrs. Stuart said to Joanna.

"Oh, yes; I am quite well now, thank you," Joanna answered in some confusion. "It was nothing really."

Gertrude began to pull to pieces a chrysanthemum which had dropped from the basket of flowers on the table, and was about to speak when Cecil came in.

"Gertrude," she began, but, seeing Mrs. Stuart, stopped. "Oh! I beg your pardon, I wanted to tell Gertrude not to bother Joanna,"

"She is not bothering me," said Joanna; "she was hearing me say a piece of French poetry."

"Oh! very well," said Cecil, coldly; "Papa has

given you into my charge to see that you were not over tired, and I must do so."

Poor Cecil felt some pangs of jealousy, that in spite of sleeping with Joanna, and in spite of her many attentions during the past week, Gertrude seemed to be cared for more than she was.

"Gertrude, is your German ready for tomorrow?" Cecil said next, by way of a hint that she had better go to the schoolroom.

But Gertrude made no reply, and began to question Mrs. Stuart eagerly about the box which was to be sent to her dusky school children, and asked if she might help to make something for them.

"Yes, indeed; I shall be delighted. I have been thinking of having a Bee at the Vicarage this winter once a week; and if it would not interfere with any lessons, and if Miss Prendergast approves the plan, I shall hope to see you all."

"Oh! thank you," exclaimed Gertrude; "but what is a Bee?"

"Can't you guess? A collection of workers; for we won't allow any drones in the hive. I hope to get through plenty of work by this means, and not only for India but for our own poor people at home. Tell me the names of some of your young friends whom I may ask to join us."

"The three Cuthberts and Mr. Davidson's daughter," Cecil said, "and the Masons, Maudie and Eva ; and then there are the Hadwyns, but I don't think you would like to have the Hadwyns."

"Why not?" asked Mrs. Stuart ; "who are they?"

"Oh ! they are not exactly nice girls," Cecil said ; "they do extraordinary things. If you had the Hadwyns, the Cuthberts are sure not to come. They have no friends but the Westons, and they are not quite—well, you know what I mean."

Mrs. Stuart took out a pencil and wrote the names in her notebook, and said she thought Saturday afternoon would be the best time.

"We have M. Le Bras at half-past two, but no other lesson," Gertrude said. "How delightful the Bee will be ; and it is such a good name for it. I hope we shan't get any wasps in by mistake, that's all."

Miss Prendergast had taken Daisy and Sibyl out to an early tea to meet the grandchildren of an old lady, Mrs. Seymour, who was a near neighbour. She came in at this moment, saying that Daisy and Sibyl were left for another hour, and Sarah was to fetch them at half-past six. Miss Prendergast was evidently full of something which, in spite of her cordial greetings to Mrs. Stuart, she was longing to divulge.

"I am so glad to see you, Mrs. Stuart. Joanna Coningham has not been very well; extremely vexatious for us; the very day after her arrival. There is so much gossip in a little place like Minsterholme, and dear Mrs. Seymour has got hold of the tale in such a very exaggerated form. It must have come from the Cuthberts; it is so very provoking; and your father will be displeased, Gertrude, if any of this gossip reaches his ears. If it would only teach you a lesson, but I fear that is nearly hopeless."

All the time Miss Prendergast was looking from Gertrude to Mrs. Stuart, who was quite at a loss to know to what or to whom these remarks were directed.

"If the gossip reaches you," Miss Prendergast began:—

"That is hardly probable, for I am, you know, a comparative stranger in Minsterholme. Perhaps that is why I hear so little of my neighbours. I should have come to inquire for Joanna before, if I had known of her illness, but it was only this morning that my brother told me she had not been well."

"I am sure I am glad you have heard nothing more," Miss Prendergast said. "Reports get so much exaggerated."

Mrs. Stuart saw that the subject was not a pleasant one, and with ready tact hastened to change it. This was not an easy matter ; but Mrs. Stuart was not to be diverted from her object, and was rewarded at last by Miss Prendergast's keen interest in her Bee at the Vicarage, and her promise of help.

As soon as she had gone, Miss Prendergast called the two girls into her room, and then told them that a report was circulated in the town that Joanna was of weak intellect, and was subject to fits.

"What a fearful shame !" both girls exclaimed ; while Cecil said she knew how the report had arisen ; it was little Sibyl's idea. And then Cecil explained what had passed on Sunday morning as they went into church. Gertrude saw at once what she must do, and all the consequences of her foolish act seemed to be unrolled before her.

"I shall tell Mrs. Stuart, and the Cuthberts, and Mrs. Seymour the truth," she said.

"You had better not take any step in the matter," Aunt Helen said. "You will only make it worse."

"Yes," Cecil interposed ; "I am sure the less *you* say the better. It is pleasant for you certainly, that Joanna should be thought to be an idiot by your means."

"Cecil, you are always so hard on me!" Gertrude said passionately; and she went away to the schoolroom, and flinging herself into the arm-chair, she buried her face in her hands, and accused herself more bitterly than any one else could accuse her. She was roused by Charlie coming in whistling, as was his wont; but Gertrude's face, when she raised it, checked him at once.

"Hallo, old girl! what is wrong now?"

"This is wrong," said Gertrude starting up,— "that when once we do anything we feel is not right, we never know where it will end. Only fancy, Charlie, that people are beginning to say poor Joanna is of weak mind; and all through me."

"What a joke!" said Charlie carelessly. "How did people, as you call them, catch hold of such a story?"

"Only by Sibyl saying to Lottie Cuthbert that Joanna had had a fit, when they asked what was the matter with her on Sunday. I must set it right; and yet it is horrid to have to tell the Cuthberts and old Mrs. Seymour that I dressed up and frightened Joanna till I made her ill. I shall write to Mrs. Stuart, and I must consult papa about the others."

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"I should just leave it alone," said Charlie indifferently. "There will be a tremendous row in school to-morrow, I expect."

"You are not mixed up in it, I hope, Charlie?"

"Oh! it is all lies, and will soon come right, I dare say. It is about one of the boarders being out of bounds with Weston."

"That horrid boy!" Gertrude exclaimed. "If he is in this row, I am certain you are."

"Nothing is proved; only old Spiers says he will go with a complaint to Birchall to-morrow about his son. One of the fellows has given him a black eye; and serve him right too."

"Who is Spiers? I never heard the name before."

"No, I dare say not," said Charlie derisively. "He is only the old fellow who keeps a little place on the Ashton Road, and sells all manner of things."

"It must be a horrid little place," said Gertrude, "and I am sure you ought never to go there. Charlie, I do hope you have not done anything very bad."

Charlie laughed a loud ringing laugh, but there was no mirth in it.

Old Spiers's was, as Gertrude truly said, a horrid place. Charlie knew, that only six months ago, he would have been angry if any one had hinted that

he frequented Spiers's cottage. For it was but a cottage, standing a little back from the road in one of the outskirts of Minsterholme. A narrow lane on one side of the College playground led to it by a back way. Ginger beer, lemonade, and a sweet drink manufactured by Mrs. Spiers out of sherbet were to be had at reasonable prices. Indeed, there was a suspicion that the young gentlemen could get something a little stronger than these at Spiers's cottage. Anyhow Spiers's place was forbidden ground to all College boys, and since Mr. Birchall had been Head-master the old man's business had declined.

Mr. and Mrs. Spiers had two very doubtful-looking sons, who kept lop-eared rabbits, squirrels, mice, and other pets, to which schoolboys sometimes take a fancy ; and by trading in these they managed to get a very fair amount of profit. There was also a strip of grass behind Spiers's where bowls could be played ; of course every College boy was strictly forbidden to touch the balls.

Charlie Prendergast knew all this only too well ; and it would be hard to say what enjoyment he could find in transactions with the Spiers. But one false step leads to another, and by degrees he grew accustomed to turn in there with Weston and one or two of the other College boys. A few days

before, Weston and one of Spiers' boys had had a controversy about a rabbit which Weston had bought. Weston declared it had been changed on the way from Spiers' cottage to his house in Mercer's Street, and high words had ensued ; Weston had taken the law into his own hands, and thrashed the boy who, he said, had cheated him.

The blow which swelled up young Spiers' eye, was looked upon by his father as likely to be a profitable speculation. A red and white checked handkerchief was tied over it, and Mr. Weston was informed that a complaint would be lodged against him the very next day, unless some compensation was made. "His boy," Spiers averred, "wasn't going to lose a week's work for nothing."

The damages were laid at fifteen shillings, but Weston hoped an instalment would be accepted, and no more be said ; for Weston was himself in a state of bankruptcy, and his friends were not of the sort likely to help him.

As we know, he had wrung six shillings from Charlie, and had demanded six more. Charlie had failed to raise it, and the very next day old Spiers and his son declared they would come to the College school, see the head-master in his study, and bring their charge against Mr. Weston, the

doctor's son, and Stokes major, the boarder who was implicated in the affair.

Now the boys knew very well that Mr. Birchall would see something far more serious in this matter than young Spiers' black eye, which was decidedly not bad enough to account for the great patch which covered it.

But ever since Mr. Birchall had been head-master, the Spiers had been looked upon with suspicion by him, and the cottage was "out of bounds" and forbidden ground to day-boys and boarders. Thus the boys were well aware of the gravity of the offence.

"Look here, Truda," Charlie said presently, "can you by hook or by crook stump up any more money? Now don't fly off into a fury, and scold me; it will be a nice thing for you if I am expelled to-morrow. There's a lot of things which will come out if that old wretch does split on us; filling his gingerbeer bottles with whisky and water, for one thing, and selling it to us fellows on cricket afternoons. Weston owes him for a lot, and so do I, for that matter."

"Oh! Charlie, Charlie," Gertrude exclaimed in despair; "it is so dreadful."

"Well, help me out of it, Truda; there's a good girl."

"I can't, I can't. I have not a farthing in the world, and when my monthly allowance is paid, I shall have to give it to Cecil, for some stupid thing I got her to buy for me when she went to London with Aunt Helen."

"What was it? Perhaps I could get some chink for it."

"Oh no, you couldn't; it is all broken and spoiled; it was only a stupid chatelaine, which I hate now. But, Charlie, you had better go to papa, you had better tell him all, and ask him to help you."

"What an idiot you are! As if I could go and sneak and tell against the other fellows."

"Well, I see nothing else to be done," said Gertrude, "unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless Joanna would lend it to me. But it would not be right. Oh! I wish I knew if it were right."

It was a moment of indecision and weakness, a trying moment for poor Gertrude. To escape from a disgrace so terrible as Charlie being expelled from the school was a great temptation; all the misery at home; all the gossip! And yet, could it be right?

"If I do ask Joanna, will you promise to have no

more to do with Weston, and never go to Spiers' again? Oh, Charlie, I don't know what to do!"

"Well, if I am expelled I shall run away, and you will never see me again. Now I have done."

Gertrude stayed to hear no more; but rushed impetuously to Joanna's room. If Cecil should be there, if Sarah should be there, it would be impossible to ask; and Charlie said unless he had the money before he went to preparation that evening it would be too late.

Joanna was alone, and lying wearily on the sofa at the foot of her bed. Gertrude's sudden entrance made her start nervously.

"Were you asleep? Does your head ache? I am so sorry. O Joanna, could you, would you mind lending me six shillings?"

Unless she had plunged into the request at once, Gertrude's courage would have failed.

"Six shillings! Oh yes! You can have as much as you like. Dr. Prendergast gave me some money the day I came here. The purse is in that little drawer in the dressing-table."

Gertrude snatched it hastily, and opened it. There was no silver, only gold.

"May I take half a sovereign?" she said. "It is not for myself. And please don't tell any one—not Cecil—that I asked for it."


"Oh no," said Joanna ; " money is no use to me ; pray take what you want."

"I only want to *borrow* it," said Gertrude, with that vague idea of repayment which people in the most hopeless state of insolvency so often cherish. "Thank you." And flying off, Gertrude ran against Cecil at the door ; she knocked a little workbasket out of her hand, and received a sharp rebuke. But Gertrude did not stop to listen ; she was back in the schoolroom as quick as thought, and found both the brothers there. But Oswald was too deeply engrossed with his work to look up ; so the half-sovereign was laid unnoticed upon the page of Charlie's open Ovid.

He made no sign of recognition, but quietly slipped the money into his waistcoat pocket ; and soon after, the bell summoned them all to tea.

The question involved in Gertrude's compliance with Charlie's request is a very difficult one. Shall we, to avert a present danger from one we love, risk the possibility of countenancing what is wrong? God has not left us without a compass on the stormy sea of life. He has given us a guide if we will seek Him ; why do we not go to Him in our trouble ; but too often prefer our own judgment.

Charlie came in later than ever that evening. Dr. Prendergast was very angry and displeased ;



Charlie hard and indifferent. Poor Gertrude went to bed, sad at heart, and feeling as if the events of the past week had added a year to her young life. And yet the dominant feeling was one of relief that Charlie had escaped the disgrace of being expelled from the College school. Poor child! Neither she nor her brother had considered how unlikely it was that old Spiers would bring the charge against the boys, as he would criminate himself so greatly in the matter of the debt about the gingerbeer bottles filled with what he had no right to sell.

But Spiers had the boys who were weak enough to resort to his cottage in his power, and by threats at one time and cringing and flattery at another, managed to keep up what he called "a very tidy little business," in spite of the new head-master, who "tried to crush a poor man, and prevent the young gents from having a bit of fun natural to their age."

"Well, Constance," Mr. Hastings said the next morning at breakfast, "who is your correspondent?"

The Vicar was watching his sister's face as she read a blotted scrawl which had been put into an envelope upside down, and was directed in a manner which would have shocked Miss Scales' sense of

propriety, for the address was all tending towards the left hand, and there was a flourish under the word Minsterholme which the governess would have fitly styled vulgar.

Mrs. Stuart looked up at last and smiled.

"This letter is from Gertrude Prendergast," she said. "I think you had better read it. Poor child ; I appreciate most thoroughly her motive in writing it, and I think hers will be a fine character some day."

The Vicar held out his hand across the breakfast-table for the letter, and read as follows :

"MY DEAR MRS. STUART,—There is a horrid report in the town that Joanna Coningham had a fit on Saturday night. It is a great shame to say so. I cannot be happy till I tell you that I dressed up like Joan of Arc and went through the dressing-room into Joanna's room. You know there is a long glass there, which Aunt Helen always uses when she goes to a party. Joanna caught sight of me tied up in an old sheet in this glass. She screamed with fright, and rushed out into the corridor, where she fell down a fearful thump, and papa came up. She was fainting, and papa was frightened, and the servants said she would go mad. Please will you tell every one, if you hear anything

about it, that it was all my stupid trick ? But one good thing is, Joanna and I are friends. I was horrid to her all Saturday, her first day with us. Now I am really sorry. Charlie"—but here the pen had been drawn through his name—"I find it very hard to do right. I hope you will tell me everything; for you are so kind. Excuse this dreadful scrawl. I can't find a J pen, and this is one of Cecil's scratchy ones. Good-bye, dear Mrs. Stuart.

"I am your affectionate

"GERTRUDE MARY PRENDERGAST."

"What dashes and marks!" the Vicar exclaimed; "and I beg leave to doubt if all the J pens in the world would make this a decent hand. But it is a well-intentioned letter: I understand now several dark hints I have heard this week about that poor girl."

"You never told me."

"No, indeed; gossip receives so little encouragement from you, I did not think of it. Will you answer this letter?"

"I shall try to see the poor child. I think I will ask her to take a walk with me, for it is so much easier to talk out of doors."

"It is lovely October weather," the Vicar said.
"Quite a St. Luke's summer, to repay us for the

rain of June and July. By-the-bye, that poor girl on the Ashton Road is very ill, and I don't think I shall be able to go as far to-day ; for Harrison is gone away for two days ; that would do for a walk for you and Gertrude Prendergast, for I should not like the day to pass without hearing of her."

" I will go, certainly, and ask Gertrude to come with me. I will leave a note at the Priory as I go to the school."

Mrs. Stuart accordingly wrote a little note to Gertrude, which was taken into the schoolroom that morning as she sat at her lessons.

" What is it ?" Cecil asked.

Gertrude coloured. " It is only Mrs. Stuart wants me to take a walk with her at two o'clock."

" You !" Cecil exclaimed.

" Yes, *me* ; and pray why not ?"

" Attend to your lessons, if you please," said Miss Scales in her very hardest schoolroom voice, " and discuss Mrs. Stuart's note another time."

CHAPTER V.

NEXT OF KIN.

GERTRUDE felt rather shy and uneasy when she set out with Mrs. Stuart for the walk. She had written that note after her impulsive, quick fashion, and she now began to wish she could recall it. Perhaps Mrs. Stuart would think her foolish, would wonder why she should trouble her—a comparative stranger—with her concerns ; but it was done now, and whatever Mrs. Stuart thought or whatever she said, she must endure it.

“ I am glad Joanna is better,” Mrs. Stuart began, when they had turned into the Priory Road. “ I thought I would answer your note in person ; and I am so glad of a companion for this long walk ; I want to go and see a poor girl who is very ill, and who lives quite three miles off in the Lower Ashton Road. I suppose you are a good walker ? ”

“ Oh yes,” Gertrude said. “ I am never tired.

I thought I ought to tell you about Joanna," she began. "It is so horrid to think of this report."

"It had not reached me," Mrs. Stuart said, "and I should think it will be very easy to make people forget it. But I am very sorry for you, I know how grieved you must feel."

Gertrude's face brightened. Mrs. Stuart was the first person who had expressed sorrow for her. She had had plenty of blame and reproaches, but not even her father had said he was sorry for her.

"Thank you," she said eagerly. "I was so miserable at first; and now, though I believe Joanna is all right, I hate to think the Cuthberts and other people are gossiping about her."

"Yes; that is a hard penalty to pay for a trick which I would call foolish, only such fearful consequences have sometimes resulted from practical jokes that I dare not call it only foolish. However, you have done what you can to repair the mischief you caused, and I hope you will never forget the lesson."

"I feel as if I never should," said Gertrude; "but Joanna is not my only trouble. I wish you would tell me, Mrs. Stuart, if you think borrowing money is wrong."

"The borrower is servant to the lender," said

Mrs. Stuart ; "and I think for a girl of your age, I may safely say, borrowing *is* wrong."

"But if it were to save some one from something terrible—if it were to do good to any one. I can't tell you who it was for, but I did borrow some money last night, and I am not exactly happy about it."

"My dear, in the question of money, I should think it was always safer to go to your father or to your aunt."

"Oh, in this case that was impossible," said Gertrude. "It is not as if I were the only person concerned ; but I did it for somebody else's sake, and for all our sakes."

They had now reached the bend of the Ashton Road, into which the back lane to Spiers' cottage opened. Two rough-looking lads were lounging by a gate, and as Mrs. Stuart and Gertrude passed, there was the sound of a low, rude laugh, and one of them called out, intending that what he said should be heard :

"I wasn't a-going to have my eye knocked out for nothing, not I !"

Gertrude put her hand on Mrs. Stuart's arm :
"Oh, do come on quickly."

Mrs. Stuart was surprised to see how much Gertrude was agitated.

"Why, Gertrude," she said, laughing, "I should have thought you would never be afraid of anything. I think I know who those boys are ; wait a moment ; I will go back and speak to them."

"Oh! pray—pray don't, Mrs. Stuart ; please don't!"

But Mrs. Stuart disengaged herself from Gertrude, and said that she would not keep her waiting two minutes.

Gertrude stood just within hearing, and saw Mrs. Stuart walk straight up to the two youths, and heard her ask :

"Is not your house in the parish of St. Mary's? the cottage at the end of that lane is where you live, I think?"

"What business be that of yourn?" was the reply.

"Only that I should be so very glad if you would come to St. Mary's Vicarage this evening, and let me tell you about a night-school which was opened last Monday. Will you come and see me?"

The younger of the two boys chucked the tobacco out of a short pipe on the bar of the gate, and said :

"What will you give us for coming? we ought to be paid for our trouble, eh?"

"Well, I will give you a cup of strong good coffee

and a roll," Mrs. Stuart said, with a smile, and apparently taking no notice of the rudeness with which her kindness was received.

"A cup of coffee!" the other said derisively. "If it was a cup of good stout, with a dash of gin in it, now—" then an oath was about to follow, when Mrs. Stuart raised her hand, and said gravely—

"Hush! do not let me hear that Holy Name used thus. But come to-night to the Vicarage, and I will say more to you."

"What do you want with the likes of us?" the younger asked again.

"What do I want!" Mrs. Stuart exclaimed, her beautiful clear eyes kindling; "what do I want! Why, I want to show you the way to be happy; and I want you to come to the night-school, where I will do my very best to teach you. Now," she added, "good-bye. I think you will not refuse me. Good-bye."

She rejoined Gertrude, and walked quietly onward.

"Oh, Mrs. Stuart, how could you talk to those dreadful boys?"

"My dear, I have talked to far more dreadful subjects than those many times. Why should I not ask them to come to school? Do you know their names?"

"Yes—no. I am not sure." Gertrude hesitated. The remark about the eye made her feel sure she was recognised by the boys, and that they were the two Spiers ; but she had never seen them, that she remembered, before.

"I think they live in that cottage down the lane. I think their names may be Spiers," she said ; but her manner was confused, and Mrs. Stuart, seeing that she was uncertain in her answers, asked no more questions.

The path to the village of Ashton lay over fields and meadows, and Gertrude was soon forgetting the Spiers and all her troubles in the excitement of climbing up the hedges to get Mrs. Stuart the finest blackberries—blackberries which grew so high that they had been as yet secure from any ruthless hand. But Gertrude's climbing skill set all preconceived notions at defiance ; and Mrs. Stuart watched her feats with some amusement, and some alarm.

One most lovely cluster which the sun caught, making the great berries shine like polished ebony, Gertrude tried several times to reach.

"Do not attempt that, Gertrude," Mrs. Stuart remonstrated.

"Oh ! I must have another try ; I always have three before I give up," and with another spring Gertrude reached the highest point of the hedge,

and with the handle of her umbrella pulled the whole of the rich freight down.

Four splendid branches, on which blackberries as big as mulberries hung, was the reward, and in spite of scratches and certain triangular rents in her serge dress, Gertrude was triumphant.

"Shall I take them to the poor sick girl?" Gertrude asked, as she returned to Mrs. Stuart's side; and then for the first time she became conscious that her feats had been observed by some one who was following them.

A young man with a bright, pleasant smile and a little travelling apparatus strapped across his shoulders, now came up, and taking off his hat, with a sort of innate grace, difficult to describe, said to Mrs. Stuart:

"May I ask you if I am taking the right road to Ashton Court?"

"Ashton Court!" Gertrude exclaimed involuntarily.

The stranger looked at her with the great bramble branches in her hands which were scratched and pricked, her hat battered and torn, and falling off her head, her gold-coloured hair in direst confusion, and her bright face flushed as crimson as some of the leaves on the branches she held.

"Gertrude," Mrs. Stuart said, "you know the

neighbourhood much better than I do. This path leads to Ashton Court, I suppose?"

"Oh yes; but Ashton Court is quite two miles farther than Lower Ashton; it is five miles from the town."

"Thanks," said the stranger; "but anyhow, I suppose I am right in keeping on in this direction?"

"Yes; but when you come to the village of Lower Ashton, you must go across the road, and then turn to the left—no, to the right, and get over a stile, and go by the field path till you see——"

"My dear Gertrude," Mrs. Stuart said, "your description is not very lucid."

The young stranger laughed.

"You know the way to the top of a high bank better than to Ashton Court, it seems. But," he said, turning to Mrs. Stuart, "perhaps you will allow me to walk with you to the end of these field paths, and then, if once in Ashton village, I will beg you to direct me further."

Gertrude had not liked the reference to the high bank. A sudden consciousness that her appearance had greatly suffered in the blackberry fray, and a half-painful sense that she was getting too old to indulge in such feats, shot through her. She walked silently on, while Mrs. Stuart and the young man talked of the beauty of the afternoon, the

country, and such topics as naturally present themselves when people who are strangers to each other are thrown together, and have the grace of good breeding, which prevents shy reserve on the one hand, and too great confidence on the other.

"Ashton Court is a fine place, I believe," the young man said presently, "and worth a visit. The church, too, is old, and a large family of De somebody lie there."

"De Spencer," Gertrude could not help saying.

"Yes; I believe you are right. The present owner of Ashton is, however, not a De any one."

"No; she is—Miss Coningham, the granddaughter of the old Lady Beauclerc, who has lately died."

"Yes; and she lives with us," Gertrude added, unable any longer to resist information about Joanna.

"Lives with you? I hope she is an agreeable inmate. I have heard of Miss Coningham, the heiress of Ashton Court; and I should think her companionship with you must be an unmixed advantage to her. Anyhow, you can teach her to climb!"

Gertrude felt almost inclined to throw down the clusters of blackberries which had brought upon her so many references to her climbing. She re-

lapsed into silence, and when they parted from their companion in the village, she gave him a very distant bow in answer to his most respectful one, as he said :

"To the right and to the left, and to the right again, and I shall get to Ashton Court, you say. Good-afternoon, and many thanks."

"Who can that be, Mrs. Stuart? He must be a stranger, and yet he knows about Joanna. I thought I liked him at first, but I can't endure him; he is so priggish and conceited."

"I don't think so; though perhaps he has a sufficiently good opinion of himself. Still, it would be difficult to be so handsome without knowing it."

"I did not think him handsome. But how odd it is about Joanna; and Mrs. Stuart, is it not strange that people and things come suddenly into one's life? A fortnight ago, and I had never thought of Joanna, and scarcely heard her name; and now it is nothing but Joanna everywhere."

"Had you never seen her till she came to your house?"

"I may have seen her driving in that great old-fashioned carriage, but Lady Beauclerc seldom drove into Minsterholme. I never took any particular notice of her; papa, you know, never talks about his patients: and I never heard him say anything

about Joanna, except that Lady Beauclerc had a grand-daughter living with her. She never came in our way, and so we never thought about her ; and now here she is quite a feature in our lives, as Miss Scales would say. She is always talking about the features of every one's character. Mine in particular."

"I am afraid she would say the feature of your appearance at this moment was that of untidyness, and would think I must have encouraged you in all kinds of climbing."

"Am I a great object?" Gertrude said. "If you will hold these a minute" (handing her the black-berry branches), "I will tighten the elastic of my hat ; it keeps falling back so. And if you have a pin, I think I could fasten up this big rent."

"Perhaps we can borrow a needle and cotton at Annie Wood's cottage," Mrs. Stuart said, looking in some dismay at the great jagged tear across the skirt of Gertrude's dress. "No pin will, I fear, hold together the two edges of a chasm like that. Mrs. Wood keeps a little shop in the village street ; we must be near it now. Poor Annie lived in service at Minsterholme, and was overworked. She held on bravely for her mother's sake, and now I am afraid rest has come too late. The doctor ordered her to go home last week, and my brother heard yesterday she was much worse."

The little shop stood rather back from the line of the other cottages, and a black board over the door announced that Martha Wood was licensed to sell tea, tobacco, and snuff, and below, in larger characters, was printed "General Shop."

The contents of the shop were very general indeed—penny toys and sticks of dark toffee, balls of string and cotton, and a few red herrings were in the window; while a skin of lard, marbles, starch, and a jar of treacle were on the counter.

Mrs. Wood was standing there when Mrs. Stuart and Gertrude went in, the little querulous bell tinkling, as the door was pushed back.

"How is Annie Wood to-day?" Mrs. Stuart said. "I am come from Mr. Hastings, to tell her he hopes to get over here to see her to-morrow, it was impossible for him to do so to-day."

"Thank you, ma'am, I am sure. Annie is a bit easier this afternoon, and her breath isn't quite so short.—What for you, my dear?" Mrs. Wood broke off to address a little boy who had come in.

The child laid a penny on the counter, and said, "Two sticks of sweetie."

Mrs. Wood handed them out of the glass jar, and went on with her account of Annie.

"She would like to see you, ma'am," Mrs. Wood said. "It is a hard thing for her, poor girl, and

worse for me. She used to help me with her wages, and kept herself so respectable, and if she had had a proper mistress, it need not have happened. She was sent out with messages in rain and wind of an evening, with a cold on her; and she was worked like a slave while company was in the house. She was never in her bed till past midnight, and up at five and six. Oh, it is a wicked shame," said Mrs. Wood, "when gentry treat poor maids as if they had no feelings, and no nothing."

Gertrude listened to this outpouring of grief and indignation with wide-open eyes.

Mrs. Stuart stopped the poor mother at last by saying she would go upstairs and see Annie.

"And the young lady is welcome, too."

But Gertrude shrank back. "No, thank you; I will wait here. Will you take the blackberries, Mrs. Stuart, please?"

"Won't you come and give them yourself?" But Gertrude still hesitated, she was not accustomed to the sight of illness, and she dreaded it.

"Very well," Mrs. Stuart said. "Perhaps Mrs. Wood will give you a needle and cotton, and you can mend your dress while I go upstairs. I shall find my way," she said to Mrs. Wood.

"Take care how you go, please, ma'am; the stairs be very dark and steep at the top. I'll find

you a needle, missie, and a thimble. Dear, dear, that is a sad rent—in such a beautiful dress too.”

The needle and cotton and a huge brass thimble were produced from a large box behind the counter, and Gertrude, seating herself on a chair in a corner of the shop, began her cobbling operations. Her stitches were few and far between; but when the mending was concluded, although the skirt had an awkward hitch on one side, from the large inroads which had been made on either side of the rent, Gertrude’s appearance was at any rate greatly improved.

Three little children now came in from school; and Mrs. Wood, giving them each a hunch of brown bread, sent them out again to play till dark, for fear their noise should disturb sister Annie. Two or three customers came in for small purchases, and all inquired for Annie; for her case seemed to excite much sympathy in the village. Mrs. Wood told the same story over and over again; and Gertrude heard that the name of the family where Annie had lived was Weston. She was ready enough to believe Mrs. Wood when she declared that “they were flashy folks, not like real gentry, and all was for show, and they just tried how they could get as much as possible out of poor people for their money. It was a hard thing, that her poor girl should be

worked to death by such like ; though to be sure she ought to have complained sooner, and not gone on till she had dropped like a poor horse in a cart."

Mrs. Wood was naturally full of sorrow, not un-mixed with indignation, at her daughter's condition, and Gertrude was full of sympathy with her, especially as the delinquents were Westons.

Mrs. Stuart came down from her visit to the sick girl with a sad face, and Gertrude saw that she was much distressed.

"She is very ill, Mrs. Wood. I think no one should sleep in her room but Tommy ; will no neighbour take two of the children for you ?"

"Well, I am sure I don't know, ma'am ; but I will see about it."

"It is so very important that the room should not be too hot and close ; poor Annie's breath is so laboured. I wish I were nearer to you ; but I will send out to-morrow some ice and some other things, which I think may relieve her. And I am sure the Vicar will come, for she seems to wish to see him."

"Thank you, ma'am, kindly, I am sure. There is no one here to look after us poor folks ; I expect I shall lose her, that I do," and poor Mrs. Wood's tears broke forth.

"She is in God's hands, and we must try to leave

her there. That little girl who is with her seems a nice handy child."

"Yes, bless her; and they are all good children, and Annie was the best of them, that she was."

Mrs. Stuart was silent for some time after they left the Woods' house. She was thinking sadly of the want of consideration and thought for the good of others, which causes so much sorrow and misery in the world. Poor Annie's tale had made her heart ache, and when at last she spoke to Gertrude, it was in a sad, depressed voice, quite unlike her usual one.

"It does seem," she said, "as if we could not be too careful about the wants and feelings of others; and I hope, my dear child, you will not think carelessness and thoughtlessness are light faults. No one who could see that poor girl lying there between life and death but must be sorry for those who have caused all this mischief."

"Very angry, I should think," said Gertrude impetuously—"not sorry. They sent her out with an awful cold to get a fly to go to the theatre one night, because the one that was ordered did not come, and she got her feet wet through, and then she was up till twelve o'clock clearing away the supper-things, and——"

"Has Mrs. Wood been telling you all this?"

"She has been telling the women who came into

the shop; and I knew what horrid people the Westons are, for the boy is at the College School, and I believe leads Charlie into all kinds of mischief and trouble."

"Very likely he has not good home training. You should do all you can to influence your brother in an opposite direction."

"I believe Weston makes a dead set at him—and for what he can get out of him; but Charlie is so easily imposed upon."

When Gertrude arrived at home, she was full of the results of her walk. She rushed upstairs to the schoolroom, and to her great satisfaction found Joanna and Cecil there, with Oswald. It is always pleasant to find listeners to adventures, and Gertrude flung herself down on the hearthrug, and poured out a rapid account of her afternoon, touching but slightly on the interview with the Spiers, to whom she did not give a name, but called them "two awful-looking, hulking creatures, with caps made of rabbit skins, and red waistcoats, all jagged and ragged. And Mrs. Stuart seemed quite fond of them, and asked them to go and have some coffee at the Vicarage." Then followed the story of Annie Wood and the blackberries, and then Gertrude exclaimed, "I have got something to tell you that will make even Cecil curious; it is about

you, Joanna. We met a tall and, Mrs. Stuart says, handsome man, who asked the way to Ashton Court, and said he had heard of you, Joanna, though he had never seen you ; and I told him you lived with us."

"How like you, Truda, to be confidential at once," Cecil said, quickened however to interest in spite of herself. But Gertrude took no notice of the interruption, and went on, delighted to see that Joanna was excited and anxious to hear more.

"He said—this man—that he was going to see Ashton Court and the church, where he said many old 'De somebodys' were lying."

"De Spencers," Joanna interposed.

"Yes : so I told him. And your grandmother was a De Spencer, wasn't she, and Ashton Court was hers?"

"Yes. Her only brother died, and there were no children : and that is why my grandmother had Ashton Court."

"Yes, I know that ; but I did not tell this man so. I do so wonder who he is. And what business had he to talk about you, and go and poke about Ashton? Oswald, don't you think it is very odd?"

"Very impertinent," said Oswald shortly.

"Yes ; and he is such a prig," Gertrude added, her face flushing crimson again at the remembrance

of her appearance on the top of the hedge, and the stranger's glance at her torn and untidy dress.

"Joanna, have you any idea who he could be?"

"No, indeed; I can't imagine who he is. I know no one—"

"I daresay," said Oswald, "he is some relative of your father's family. There is a Lord Beauclerc, isn't there?"

"Yes; but he is old—not young, I mean. I should think he is as old as Dr. Prendergast."

"This man is about twenty; older than Oswald, but not more than twenty. Mrs. Stuart said he was very good-looking, but I did not think so."

"You told us that before," said Cecil. "I suppose you remember to-morrow will be Saturday, and that M. Le Bras comes?"

"Saturday again? So it is! And yet I am sure it feels like a year since last Saturday."

"Is the 'Bee' to begin to-morrow, Gertrude?" Cecil asked. "Lottie Cuthbert came to tell us about it as a piece of news."

"How amusing!" said Gertrude. "I suppose she was as full of airs as ever? Her face provokes me."

"Is not she thought very pretty?" Joanna asked. "May told me she was very much admired."

"You must not believe what the Cuthberts say of each other, Joan," said Gertrude. "They have

all the most enormously good opinion of themselves, and they make their relationship to the Dean of Scarstone and the Canon of another place a stepping-stone on which to rise to a very exalted place in Minsterholme."

"Gertrude, do not talk such rubbish," said Oswald impatiently. "Can't you be quiet for ten minutes? You surely have chattered enough for a week."

"And do take off those dreadfully muddy boots," Cecil said, as she was leaving the schoolroom to join her aunt in the drawing-room, which she always did in the afternoon, to assist in the ceremony of five o'clock tea, and prevent Sibyl and Daisy from being too *exigeantes* if any visitors arrived. Gertrude followed, dragging her battered hat behind her by the elastic, and Oswald and Joanna were left alone.

"Now," he said presently, "shall I help you with that French?"

"It is so kind of you," Joanna said. "But will it make your head worse?"

"Nonsense! my head only aches as it often does."

"Don't you think," said Joanna timidly, "it would be better for you to go out on a half-holiday than sit at home?"

"You don't want my company, I suppose?"

"Oh, it's not that, you know," said Joanna. "You have been so good to me since I came here. I only want you to get quite strong and get the scholarship."

"Well, I have been at scholarship work this afternoon, while you have been sitting like a mouse by the fire. But I am not to try next March ; so it is not much use, is it ?"

Joanna's "Madame Thérèse" slipped from her hand as she sat on a low stool looking up at Oswald. "I am so stupid—tell me what a scholarship is."

"Well, at most of the colleges at Oxford there are sums of money left or given by people, which are to be won by fellows who pass the best examinations in classics—Latin and Greek, you know, and sometimes in mathematics. I want to get the one at University—it would be eighty pounds a year—and then I should not be a burden to my father."

"And when you get it—the scholarship I mean—what would you do ?"

"Do ? Why, take honours, come out a 'first,' perhaps ; and then have a jolly life amongst books, and learn all I want to learn, and perhaps do something that people who cared for me would be proud of one day."

"Write a book, do you mean ?" Joanna said.

"Perhaps," said Oswald, throwing back his head and folding his hands behind it. "And be Fellow of my college—Master, too, one day."

"I thought people who went to Oxford and Cambridge went because they wished to be clergymen."

"Ah, that is an old-fashioned notion, learned from Lady Beauclerc. However, it is certain every one is the better for being able to read all books in the languages in which they were written—the Bible amongst others."

"The Bible is different to other books," said Joanna in a half-questioning tone.

"Yes, of course."

"I always read the Psalms and lessons with grandmamma," Joanna said, "and liked to think I was looking at the very pages my mother had looked at—reading the very words. There are pencil marks in my Bible she must have made; and I love all those parts so much."

"Yes," said Oswald coolly; "our translation of the Bible is a very fine one, though it may be improved one day. Heigh-ho!" he added, with a prolonged yawn, "we have not done your French yet. Make haste! I won't say my pronunciation is Parisian, but I know the grammar."

Two pages of "Madame Thérèse" were successfully

brought to an end ; and with Oswald's help Joanna seemed to see the formation of the sentences in a new and clearer light.

It was nearly six o'clock, and the books were put away, when little Sibyl came dancing into the schoolroom.

"Joanna—Joanna! Some one wants to see you. Aunt Helen says you are to come at once. Are you neat?" the child said, glancing at Joanna's rough hair. "It is a gentleman; and Aunt Helen——"

"A gentleman!" poor Joanna exclaimed; "he can't want me. It must be a mistake."

"It is not a mistake. Make haste," said little Sibyl; "and there is papa come home," she exclaimed, dashing off, while Joanna stood as if turned to stone. All her shyness seemed to return, and she looked almost despairingly at Oswald.

"Will you come, too—will you come with me? Who do you think it is?"

"Not a New Zealander or a Fiji Islander," Oswald said. "I dare say it is the hero of Gertrude's story, who seemed to know you."

"But he can't know me; no one ever came to Ashton. I never knew any one."

"Come, now; don't stand talking there as if I could tell you how he knew you. That he does

know you is very certain ; so put a good face on it."

Poor Joanna felt all her old stiffness and shy coldness return as she got near the drawing-room door. It was a long, low room, and the fire-place was at the farther end. There, as at last she opened the door, she had a vision, as in a dream, of the bright fire, and gaslight from the chandelier—the little afternoon tea-table—Daisy and Sibyl in their blue frocks—Cecil, pretty and neat as ever—and on the sofa, by Miss Prendergast's side, a tall figure lying back, apparently entirely at ease. Then Miss Prendergast's voice was heard :

"Here is Joanna. My dear, this is Mr. Coningham, a cousin of yours." Then in a half aside which was painfully audible :

"She is very shy, and not at all strong, we fear."

Joanna advanced like one of those marionettes at which admiring children gaze spell-bound.

"Plain, awkward, and very sulky-looking," was Mr. Coningham's inward comment ; but he extended his hand, and said in a pleasant voice :

"I am come to make acquaintance with you. My father, Lord Beauclerc, is, you know, an invalid, and asked me as his representative to call upon you as I passed through Minsterholme. He was

your father's cousin, you know ; we ought not to be strangers."

"Come and sit here, my dear," said Miss Prendergast, "then you can talk to your cousin. I am sure you must be glad to see him. I hope, Mr. Coninghame, you will let me prevail on you to join our tea-table presently. Here is Dr. Prendergast. Mr. Coninghame—Arthur."

Dr. Prendergast bowed somewhat stiffly, and Miss Prendergast continued : "Joanna's cousin, Arthur. I am trying to persuade him to stay to tea."

But Dr. Prendergast did not respond, to his sister's great surprise.

Meanwhile, Joanna sat stiffly at the end of the sofa, and envied the ease with which Cecil went on with her work, and talked to the children about their doll's broken leg, over which they were lamenting.

Claude Coninghame was far too sharp-sighted not to discover that the master of the house did not second the invitation to remain to tea ; and after a little more conversation he rose to go, and said to Joanna, "My aunt told me to say she should be delighted if you could pay us a visit some day ; perhaps you will accompany my cousin," continued he, turning to Cecil. "We live in the midst of moors and heather, but we shall have some things to show you of the north country which may please you."

"Thank you," was all Cecil said demurely ; and then Claude Coningham bade good-evening to the party, and took his departure.

But Dr. Prendergast followed him from the room, and said :

"Mr. Coningham, may I have a word with you in my study about my ward?"

"Certainly ; I shall be most happy to hear what you have to say about my cousin. As I am her next of kin, it is only natural that I should wish to know her."

"I am her guardian, and as you may be aware—and the late Lady Beauclerc's instructions were very precise—it is therefore my duty to act upon them. Mr. Field, who is co-trustee with me, will tell you that there is no choice left to us but to adhere strictly to the wishes so plainly expressed. Until Joanna is of age, she is to be entirely under our guidance ; and, for what reason I know not—nor do I wish to inquire—Joanna is to have no intercourse with the family of Lord Beauclerc."

Claude smiled.

"I should think such strange, eccentric orders were more honoured in the breach than in the observance."

"That is not for me to decide," Dr. Prendergast said. "At the risk of seeming discourteous, I must

adhere to Lady Beauclerc's wishes. Until Miss Coningham is of age, it is my intention to fulfil the trust committed to me. She is still but a child, and of a very nervous and sensitive temperament, hidden under a cold, reserved exterior."

"Well, I need not detain you further, Dr. Prendergast. I shall of course tell my father of my visit and of the result."

Dr. Prendergast bowed, and then passed out into the hall with his visitor.

A sudden rush up the wide staircase made Claude Coningham look towards it. He caught sight of a laughing, merry face leaning over the first turn of the banisters; he waved his hand, and said :

"Good-night! I hope the blackberries were as good as they looked."

In another moment he was gone, and Dr. Prendergast said sternly :

"Gertrude, is that you?"

"Yes, papa," she said, springing down.

"How did you know Mr. Coningham?"

"I met him this afternoon, when I was with Mrs. Stuart, papa. He saw me standing on the top of a high bank, where I was gathering blackberries."

"Oh! was that it?" said Dr. Prendergast. "Come to tea now."

CHAPTER VI.

THE BEAUCLERCS.

THE wind was howling through the avenues of elms which led to the old home of the Beauclercs, when Claude Coningham drew near the great iron gates. The halloo of "Gate—gate!" from the driver of the cab which had brought him from the station of Culverworth, received no attention, and Claude at last put his head out of the window, and said :

"Open the gate yourself! There is no one in the lodge, I dare say!"

The driver clambered down from his seat, and after many pushes, pulls, and exclamations, succeeded in opening the rusty heavy gates, the wind all the time whistling round the shabby vehicle and rushing up the avenue with a loud roar.

At last the cab turned in, and then there was some acceleration of speed as the poor patient

horse responded to the whip, halting at last with a sudden jerk before the large dark door, over which a dim uncertain light was flickering.

Again the driver clambered down from his seat, but Claude was before him, and pulled the hanging bell with a vehemence which resounded through the deserted, desolate house.

An old and very decrepit-looking man opened the door, and said :

"Well, Mr. Coninghame, I said it was you, a-ringing like fury! You ain't expected;" and, jerking his head in the direction of a door on the right of the dark, sombre hall, he added, "things ain't very pleasant to-day."

"Well; pay the cab-fare, Matson."

"Pay! Well, I don't suppose there's five shillings in my pocket; money ain't plentiful at Culvers, Mr. Coninghame."

Claude shrugged his shoulders, and putting his hand in his waistcoat pocket, chucked half a sovereign at Matson, and then walked towards a door, over which fell a thick, heavy, large curtain.

Claude knew that curtain well; he raised it, opened the door, and on the other side came upon another curtain, if anything thicker and heavier than the one outside; but not too thick to prevent a shrill, irascible voice from reaching his ear :

"Shut the door! Who is it? You'll kill me with the draught! Oh! it's you, is it?" was Lord Beauclerc's greeting, as Claude advanced farther into the close, heated atmosphere of a room, which, in addition to a huge fire, was lighted by a large moderator lamp.

"Yes, father; and how are you—all right?"

"All right! I'm all wrong—everything is wrong."

But Claude had turned towards another arm-chair where his mother had once sat, and from which she had often welcomed him with her sweet voice—the one note of music in his young life where so much that was terrible and sad had been prominent. He sat down in the empty chair opposite his father, folded his hands at the back of his head, and looked into the fire.

"Well, you are precious grumpy, and down in the mouth. Have you seen her?"

"I have been to Minsterholme, and I have seen her—a little, plain, dark child of fifteen."

"Humph! She will grow out of that, Claude. But, whatever she is, you'll have to take her and her five thousand a year, and that place. What's the place like?"

"Rather better than this," said Claude sarcastically. "Plenty of timber, and a house in which one might be tolerably comfortable."

"Good! And did you see that charlatan, that wretched designing doctor, with his brood of children, who are to cheat you out of your rights?"

"Nonsense! I have no rights. What was I to old Lady Beauclerc? As to the doctor, I liked him; he has a good face, and an eye that would fear no man. I say this quite disinterestedly, for he gave me the cold shoulder pretty decidedly, and refused Aunt Isabel's invitation more decidedly."

"The rascal, he shall live to repent it; and the sneaking lawyer is as bad. They are a couple of rogues; but look here, Claude, there is only one chance for you, and that is a marriage with this girl. I am deeper in the mire than ever: there's no money to send you to Oxford; the school bills at Harrow are not paid; so you must hang about for a couple of years, and perhaps you may be more lucky than your father if you try your hand."

"I am not going to gamble, or stake on horses, if that's what you mean," Claude answered, standing upright now with his hands in his pocket. "I am not going to hang about, I am going to work."

"As a tinker or stone-breaker?" his father asked contemptuously.

"As-neither; but I should think either of those

occupations better than dishonour. I am going to work, Mr. Brandon has promised to help me, and I shall get on, I dare say."

"Get on! A nice heir you are to this precious title! Title indeed! with a bare cupboard and empty cellars, and debts and misery!"

Claude did not attempt to interrupt his father. He knew well, when one of his storms of invective set in, interspersed with words which cannot be written here, silence was the only refuge. His sweet, patient mother had always met these bursts of passion thus; and her voice was present always with her boy at these times. Even now he almost heard her repeat her favourite words: "Let patience have its perfect work." And, indeed, she had had sore need of patience. From the day on which her husband had unexpectedly inherited the barony of Beauclerc he had given himself up to many bad habits; and by gambling and dissipation in a few years reduced the already impoverished exchequer of the Beauclercs. Sad indeed had been the home-life which Claude had known, leavened only by the deep religious spirit of his mother; and her example had saved her son.

More than all her warnings and counsels, more than all the wise and tender words which fell from her lips, was her life. Quiet in the midst of storms,

patient under provocation, forgiving under the bitterest injuries, loving to the end as only a Christian woman can love, she, being dead, yet spoke—spoke to him, and encouraged him to prefer honourable exertion to proud poverty, and to choose the good rather than the evil.

The morning after his return to Culvers, Claude went to the only real friend he possessed in the neighbourhood, and took counsel of him.

Mr. Brandon was one of those laymen who exercise an extraordinary influence for good over the people with whom they are brought in contact. Would that their number were multiplied a thousand-fold !

A lawyer in a country town like Culverworth, with no pretension to the possession of wealth, Mr. Brandon was the moving-spring of everything which could promote the welfare of those amongst whom he lived ; and he was one of the few people whom Lady Beauclerc knew and trusted. His wife had been a friend of hers in early life, and thus, though they seldom entered Culvers, she would often go to the Brandons' happy home, and Claude had always learned to look upon Mr. Brandon with respect. He found him in the little room opening from his office in the Culverworth High Street, with a heap of papers before him.

"Are you very busy?" Claude asked, in his frank, cheerful voice.

"Not too busy to see you," Mr. Brandon said warmly. "I did not know you had returned."

"I came back last night. You know I have been to Minsterholme, and looked after my relations there. I had a rebuff from the doctor who mounts guard over the heiress, and came back determined to work. Will you help me as you promised?"

"Indeed I will. My brother-in-law has responded cordially to my proposal; he will receive you into his office in Liverpool, making only one condition."

"Out with it," said Claude.

"That you will not remind any of those with whom you are associated that your position is superior to theirs."

"I am not such a snob," said Claude proudly. "I thought you knew me better."

"I *do* know you better; but I am bound to tell you what my brother says. There can be no salary at first; but he offers you a room in his house, if you will accept it, and you will, I imagine, return here on Saturdays."

"I suppose I must do so," Claude said, "for my mother would have wished it. Aunt Isabella is in retirement just now. When I went into

that hot-house last night I missed her, and she is in her room with a cold. Glad to escape, I dare say, poor soul! She is good enough to me, as far as she is able; if I were her, I would rather live in an almshouse than in Culvers. You know how I was commissioned to tell Joanna how welcome she would be at Culvers. Poor child! it would be fun to see her big black eyes looking round her in astonishment when she got there."

"She is a mere child, I suppose?" Mr. Brandon said.

"Yes, and has an elfish look about her, and one of the doctor's children is such a little scaramouch, I expect she is a handful to manage; but she is very pretty, with a lot of gold hair tumbling about her."

And as the picture of Gertrude at the top of the hedge with the branch of blackberries in her hand rose before him, Claude laughed.

"Well now, let us go to business," said Mr. Brandon. "Will you take a pen and write to my brother-in-law, and say you accept his conditions? The concern is an enormous one, and I have every hope that you will, after a time of service, find it is lucrative. Anyway, you have made a brave resolve; the first step in the right direction; but you know it will need some steadfastness and resolution to continue in well-doing."

"Yes, and a fellow can't help thinking how different might it be ; but I would rather break the stones my father recommends to me than go on as I do now. A man in debt has no business to ride to the hounds, or shoot, or amuse himself. I am getting no good here ; so Liverpool may be a change for the better ; it can't well be for the worse."

"Well," said Mr. Brandon, leaning back in his chair, "it is better for us all to settle in our minds what we may each, if in ever so small a way, work for God ; and we must not complain of the sort of work, or think something else would suit us better. Now write your best on this sheet of paper, and cross your t's and dot your i's in clerkly fashion, and then go and see my wife. She will be very glad to see you to-day ; her spirits are none of the best, for our poor Bertie has sailed."

And Mr. Brandon sighed. "It is hard for their mother that both our boys should take this sea mania ; but they are fine fellows, and I knew better than to shut them up in an office, when their tastes were so distinctly marked."

"They are indeed nice boys," said Claude warmly, "and I am sure will do you honour in the world ; but now I must address myself to this wonderful letter. How shall I begin ?"

"Dear Mr. Macintosh—"

Mr. Brandon laughed. "No ; I think, as there is a firm, you ought to say—'Gentlemen.'"

"Very well," said Claude. "Then here goes. Gentlemen,—As I am poor, but not stuck-up, . . . I shall be glad to come into your office and count the bales of sugar.' Come, write a copy for me in commercial phraseology, I shall never say the proper thing."

At last the important letter was written, and Claude Coningham went to see his mother's old friend. Mrs. Brandon was a pale, gentle woman, whose health was delicate, and who could do very little active service in the world. But she had the blessed gift of sympathy, and could throw herself into the cares and sorrows and the joys and interests of others. Claude always felt Mrs. Brandon was a link with his mother ; and now when he went into her sitting-room he bent over her sofa and kissed her forehead.

"Well, here I am, back from my fool's errand, and I wish I had never gone ; but I have obeyed parental injunctions, and delivered Aunt Bella's invitation, and been snubbed for my pains."

"Sit down and tell me all about it, Claude," Mrs. Brandon said ; and then Claude rehearsed the

particulars of his visit to Minsterholme, as we already know them.

He told Mrs. Brandon more, however, than any one knew of the sudden and strong determination which had come upon him when he left Dr. Prendergast's house—that he would, as far as in him lay, put his shoulder to the wheel, and do what he could to retrieve the honour of his house. “Yes,” he added, “and in a better way than by catching a poor little girl of fifteen for the sake of her money.”

Then he went on to tell his friend of all his hopes and fears, and the dread he had of his father's satire and his aunt's ill-judged pity, that he, a peer's son, should take to business.

Then there was the mocking of his father's two or three boon companions, who had done their best, middle-aged men as they were, to entangle him in the meshes of their own wild courses. Of the feminine part of the society of that thinly-peopled and desolate neighbourhood Claude knew nothing, could know nothing, for no families visited at Culvers. There was nothing to tempt ladies to do so, for Lord Beauclerc was an irascible invalid at the best ; and Miss Coninghame a stiff, prim spinster, who stood upon her dignities and made herself very disagreeable, while she courted favour with her

brother simply because she preferred life under any circumstances at Culvers to that which she had formerly led in a little house in a dull back street of Liverpool, where she had found it hard work to make two ends meet. Lord Beauclerc just tolerated her presence, and was in the habit of venting his ill-tempers on her pretty freely. She was useful in looking after the cooking of his soups and concoctions, and it was convenient to have her at hand to heap coals on the fire, stuff up the cracks in the windows with wool and wash-leather, and see that those heavy curtains should be duly drawn over every possible chink and crevice. She was useful, too, as a grumbling-block, and the necessity of having some such appendage when his wife died had caused the summons to Culvers, "board and lodging free," which had proved too tempting a bait for the needy sister of the spendthrift to resist.

Miss Coningham was in a certain way proud of Claude, and he rightly judged that the step he meditated would be a shock to her feelings. She had emerged from her hiding-place when Claude returned that afternoon, and he found her in the little room where she was allowed to sit, within call of her brother, while he slept off the effects of his mid-day meal, which was always seasoned with a good allowance of very strong sherry. Claude

always felt a thrill of pity when he came upon his aunt in this shabby, bare little room. The fire was never large there, and all the surroundings were ugly.

"Well, Claude, I was sorry I was obliged to go to bed yesterday afternoon, and was not downstairs to welcome you. I am anxious to know how you have prospered." A violent fit of spasmodic coughing interrupted Miss Coningham.

"Why, Aunt Bella, your cold is very bad still, you ought to be in bed."

"No, dear ; no ! This is the day for *Bell's Life*, and I have, you know, to read it aloud there," nodding in the direction of the door which opened into the heated apartment I have before described. "Is that his bell?"

"No ; and I am sure you are not fit to read, I will do it to-day ; what a poor fire," Claude added, seizing the poker and giving the coals a bang which only sent them down in a black, smouldering mass, for there was no vitality in them.

"Oh ! pray don't—pray don't. There have been worries to-day, and *he* is—well, very much upset. That dreadful wine merchant at Liverpool is dunning for money in the most fearful way ; and there is the—but it is no use speaking of it ; tradesmen are very impertinent, forgetting your father's position."

Claude broke out vehemently :

"Aunt Bella, pray don't talk like that ; it fills me with shame. I am going to do my part to lessen this shameful disgrace ; I am going, I hope, into a merchant's office in Liverpool next week. I shall return every Saturday, if possible, for I ought not to leave my father altogether : but I will not, I cannot, lend myself, even indirectly, to what goes on here any longer."

"Claude, are you mad?" Miss Coningham exclaimed. "You, who are so handsome, and looking every inch a peer's son, and—"

"Stop, Aunt Bella ; I can't hear any more ; if only I am so fortunate as to get into Mackintosh's office, I shall be thankful."

"So degrading for you, Claude!—so beneath you !"

"Beneath me ! Say rather, I am beneath it."

"And what will *he* say?" and again the piled-up chignon, which matched so ill with the grey hair in front, was bowed in the direction of the door ; "and what will Sir Peter Sullivan and Lord Racederry, and——Oh ! it is those Brandons who have put these notions in your head ; and what can a solicitor in a country town know ? It was a great mistake of your dear mother letting you——"

"Hush, Aunt Bella ! do not mention *her*. I am

miserable enough when I think of how much I have done since—since she died, that would have grieved her ; but I know she would say I am right now.”

The violent ringing of a sharp bell was now heard, and Miss Coningham started up, gathered her crotchet into a basket, and passed into the inner room, leaving Claude alone.

“Yes,” he said, as he leaned against the chimney-piece with his head buried in his hands, “I know she would say I am right. Mother ! mother !”

So Claude Coningham determined to fight against the evil around him. It was not easy to him to resolve thus, for he was proud and ardent, and was conscious that he had many qualities which would have flourished well in a more prosperous position. He had the power of making friends, and had, as we have seen, natural ease of manners and the pleasant facility of suiting himself to his company. The latter is a dangerous gift, unless held in due check.

Claude Coningham’s character is not an uncommon one. Without the great, nay, the only safeguard, he might make sad shipwreck in the voyage of life. But the watchful love and continuous prayer of a mother like his shall never be wholly in vain—and so it was to prove in his case.

Let all mothers sow the seed, nor withhold

their hand. Let them be very constant in well-doing ; and however unlikely it may sometimes seem, however far off the crowning joy may be, in due season there will be a harvest ; and at the appointed time there shall be " the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."

After Claude Coningham's visit to Minsterholme, the life of the family at the Priory relapsed into the routine of school-room work and daily duties. Joanna's presence amongst the Prendergasts was soon familiar, and in the course of a few weeks she had taken up a position there, and seemed, as Gertrude said, as if she had always belonged to them. She continued quiet and undemonstrative, as a rule, but at times would show feverish excitement over anything which interested her, which would startle Miss Scales out of her stiff, educational manner. She made wonderful progress in her studies, and Oswald's kind hand helped her through many difficulties ; while to him she was very useful, inasmuch as she was an interest apart from his own hopes and aspirations. And the craving for success, which had been so engrossing, was less now he had a new channel for his energies. Joanna and Oswald had to endure plenty of jests from the others ; they were called by Gertrude, Dr. and Mrs. Dryasdust ; and by Charlie, the "learned pigs ;" and

various other soubriquets of the same character were liberally bestowed. Meanwhile, Gertrude blundered over her lessons, and over her work, and had, in spite of all her high spirits, a secret uneasiness about Charlie. The half-sovereign was never paid back, and Christmas was drawing near, when all kinds of claims were likely to be made upon the little purses of the family. Gertrude's allowance was always forestalled, and Charlie invariably put her off when she referred to the ten shillings.

One day Gertrude was coming home late from the Vicarage "Bee," with Cecil, when in the dim light of the winter afternoon, she was sure she saw Charlie with one of the fur-capped Spiers. The two were standing at the corner of the narrow lane leading towards the school playground, and a sudden rush that was made, confirmed her suspicions. Charlie had evidently caught sight of his sisters, and was by no means anxious to be discovered.

"What are you looking at, Gertrude? Do pray come in, it is getting quite dark;" for Gertrude had lingered, and was looking anxiously down the lane after the retreating figure.

"I believe that was Charlie rushing away from us," she said with a half-sigh.

"I dare say : he is always up to something he is ashamed of. I should not think he feels particularly pleased at the thought of the prize distribution to-morrow. I am sure I am ashamed to have a brother like him."

"I don't think you do much to help him, Cecil ; you always say a bad word for him when you can."

"What good is there to say?" Cecil asked. "He is at the bottom of his form, and is always setting papa and Aunt Helen at defiance, and making himself disagreeable."

"Oh no !" Gertrude said warmly ; "that is not true. He is nice enough when he chooses."

As she spoke, Charlie's voice was heard behind them.

"I say, it is precious dark for you two to be out. Where have you been?"

"To the 'Bee,' at the Vicarage," Gertrude said. "I have had a horrid time of it with a little pinafore. I did the hem on the wrong side, and had to pick it out."

Gertrude talked on as fast as she could, fearing that Cecil might say something which would provoke Charlie ; but Cecil preserved a cool silence. They were at the Priory almost directly, and Gertrude let Cecil precede them upstairs ; and then, turning suddenly, said :

"Charlie, was that one of those horrid boys you were with just now?"

"What horrid boys?"

"Why those Spiers, of course; and, Charlie, shall I ever have that ten shillings? It was Joanna's, you know, not mine; and I do so wish you would let me have it."

"That ten shillings! what a fuss you make about it. One would think it was ten pounds. Do hold your tongue; and if you must talk, don't talk in the hall, where every one can hear what you say."

"I would not ask, but Uncle Harry did send you a pound, you know, and——"

"Well, and did not Aunt Mary send you a pound too?"

"But I owed some of that, as I told you; and then I want it for Christmas."

"So do I. Come [now, Gertrude, Joanna will never think about that paltry ten shillings; she has heaps of money, and we are as poor as rats."

"But, Charlie, that makes no difference; it is so dishonest, so horrid and mean. O, Charlie!"

"Well, I'll see about it," he said; whistling as he went upstairs.

Gertrude followed slowly and turned into the schoolroom, where she found Joanna reading by the firelight.

"Well, Mrs. Dryasdust, where is the Doctor?"

Joanna did not lift her head, which was bent over the book on her knee. Since her arrival at the Priory a new world had opened to her; she had never read a story of any kind except two or three which Lady Beauclerc selected, and these were only allowed to be read aloud in short detachments. She was sure the element of romance must be hid in a grandchild, whose father had sacrificed his prospects to a marriage with a poor governess who was the most sentimental young person she had ever known! Thus everything that might awaken the latent romance, or feed it when called to life, was carefully avoided, and Joanna had grown to fifteen, ignorant of all the delightful literature which of late years has been so liberally provided for the young.

"Well, Joan, what are you poking over now? not German, I trust," Gertrude exclaimed, flinging herself down by Joanna's side, and pushing away one arm that she might see what she was reading.

"Oh! have not you finished the 'Heir of Redclyffe' yet? you must know it by heart."

"It's so beautiful," Joanna said with a sigh. "I have read it twice, and I feel as if I knew them all as well as I know you and Oswald, Gertrude."

"Ah! I dare say; and they are a great deal

better worth knowing. After all, Joanna, it must be very jolly to be you !”

“To be me !” Joanna exclaimed. “How can you say so ?”

“Why, of course you are somebody, and will have Ashton Court and heaps of money, one day. No bothers about what you may have and what you may not have ; and horses, and fun, and parties.”

Joanna looked into Gertrude’s face with her large dark eyes.

“Somehow I don’t think of that part much.”

“No ; because you are such a dear stupid old humdrum.”

“I should like,” Joanna went on, not noticing Gertrude’s interruption, “to do something at Ashton for the people : have schools and nice services in the church, and I should like you to live with me, of course,” she said, suddenly putting her arm round Gertrude’s neck. “And I should like to help Oswald to go to Oxford without fagging so hard, above everything else.”

“You are the best of dear stupid humdrums,” Gertrude said ; and then she laid her head against Joanna’s shoulder. “You are a great deal better than any of us. I believe you think of nothing but trying to be good. I am always naughty, though I wish I was not.”

"Don't you know," said Joanna, "what Mrs. Stuart told us the other day, that people who only wish without making an effort for anything, are like a man who sat down at the foot of a high mountain for a year and wished he was at the top ; and then finding wishing was no use, gradually turned back and thought he should do just as well without getting up there at all. And so he never saw the beautiful things from the top of the mountain, and spent his days in the low dark valley, where very little sunshine or blue sky was to be seen. And she said, too," observed Joanna, "that every little step upwards, even if we seemed to make no progress, *must* do us good."

"I dare say," said Gertrude with a sigh, almost thinking she would make a step in the right direction by telling Joanna how the debt of the ten shillings weighed on her mind. Then there came another reasoning : "What is the use of reminding her of it before I can afford to pay the money ? It is not as if she were poor and hard up, but she is so rich." And here Gertrude checked herself. Was she not indulging in the same specious reasoning for which she had only a few minutes ago rebuked Charlie ?

"How did you get on at the Bee this afternoon ?" Joanna next asked.

"Oh! I do hate work more and more. If it were not that I like to be where Mrs. Stuart is, I should give it up. Every one there is so perfect in their doings. Those Cuthberts sat smiling over their marvellous stitching in a way that was too aggravating; when I had to spend half my time in unpicking the hem of a miserable little pinafore. You were a great loss, Joanna, and Mrs. Stuart sent her love to you, and she hoped you would go next week, and she is very sorry you cannot go to the school concert to-night. It is such a bother! Here comes Doctor Dryasdust. Well, Oswald, have you got another concert ticket?"

"No," said Oswald listlessly, sinking down into his favourite seat, the dilapidated arm-chair. "You will have to stay at home, Gertrude."

"No, that I shan't. Mr. Birchall will let me in."

"Mr. Birchall! as if he would notice you in the crowd. The whole place is going, and I am sure I wonder why. The music is not of the highest order."

"But it's not that at all," said Gertrude, honestly. "It's the fun of seeing the boys, and to hear Charlie's song too. Oswald, you promised me you would get a ticket; it is too bad—it's shameful!" said Gertrude, getting more excited in her manner,

and raising her voice till Oswald told her to be quiet and not shout like a market-woman.

Gertrude was repeating that it was a shame, and she would go to the concert, when Cecil came in.

"Is it not a shame that I have not got a ticket for the college school concert, after all? It is too bad of Aunt Helen to take that horrid, affected, stupid Miss Beazley, when she knows that we had only four tickets. I know papa does not want to go; and Charlie says it is all nonsense about tickets—that it does not matter who has one."

"That is simply absurd," said Cecil in her calm and rather provoking voice. "The school-room will only hold a certain number, and Mr. Birchall has all the seats numbered, that he may be quite sure. And really, Gertrude, you profess to hate music, you always make out that to practise is a great penance."

"As if that were the same thing, you are so stupid," and Gertrude gathered up her hat which had suffered as much as such a battered hat could suffer by being under her on the rug, and dragging her jacket by the sleeve, and dropping one of her gloves and scarf behind her, she went out of the room.

She rushed up to Charlie's room; she felt pretty

sure of finding him there. The door was locked, and Gertrude knocked and turned the handle for some time in vain.

At last, when the door was opened, Gertrude exclaimed, "Smoking! O Charlie!"

"O Charlie!" he repeated; "you are getting a regular muff, I declare."

"Well," said Gertrude, "you know papa has forbidden it; and I don't think you ought to come up here and smoke out of the window; it's—well, it's deceitful."

"Thank you," said Charlie. "Anything else?"

"Yes, I came to tell you Oswald has not got a concert ticket for me; and Aunt Helen has asked that horrid Miss Beazley to go; and if papa goes I shall have to stay at home. Charlie dear, can't you get me a ticket? I do so want to go."

"It's all stuff about the ticket. The fellows who keep the doors will let you in."

"But Oswald and Cecil say they must not do it; and papa would be angry if I tried to go without a ticket, if it is against the rules. O, Charlie, can't you get me one?"

"Will you pay for one?" asked Charlie, stuffing his tobacco pouch into a secret recess formed by a little trap-door in the wall of his attic bedroom. "Will you pay for one?"

"How much?" said Gertrude eagerly.

"Well, say two shillings."

"Yes; I have got enough to buy two or three little things, if I do give you two shillings. Wait till I get my purse, but where will you buy it?"

"That's my concern; now don't go and tell everybody about it, mind that."

"No, of course not," Gertrude said; and without waiting for a moment's reflection she was off like lightning to get her purse. Then she mounted the steep stairs again, and Charlie taking the florin, departed to get the much-desired ticket.

"I am sorry, my dear Gertrude," Aunt Helen began at tea, "there is not a ticket for you; but Mrs. Birchall told me this afternoon they could only issue a certain number. You must remember you will have your turn at Midsummer."

Gertrude said nothing. Charlie's place was still vacant, and she had yet hope. Miss Beazley was making herself very agreeable to Dr. Prendergast, and was talking over the past days of the college school. Dr. Prendergast broke off abruptly in a rejoinder he was making to one of Miss Beazley's stories, to say, in a stern voice, "Late again, Charlie."

Charlie tossed a ticket across to Gertrude, saying, "I have been trying to get that."

"Well, that was really very good-natured of you, Charlie," Aunt Helen said. "I was quite sorry to disappoint Truda, and she bore it so well."

Gertrude's colour rose as Oswald said to Charlie loud enough for her to hear :

"Who gave you that ticket? There was not one to be had this afternoon, where did you get it?"

"Mind your own business," Charlie said, *sotto voce* ; and Gertrude felt uncomfortably conscious that Oswald's dark searching eyes were on her. But she reasoned—What harm could there be in buying a ticket with her own money? Of course, if the money had not been her own it would have been wrong. Then came the obtrusive question,—if she had borrowed ten shillings for Charlie, and he was unable to pay it, was she responsible? There was a very faint inward voice which whispered, Yes ; but she tried to silence it.

The merry careless Gertrude went upstairs to prepare for the concert with a slow, languid step, and her bright face was grave and clouded as she stood in her cloak in the hall, waiting for the party to assemble.

"Gertrude ready first ; wonderful!" said Dr. Prendergast. Oswald and Charlie had gone on earlier to the schoolhouse, as both boys were to take part in the concert.

At the principal entrance the stewards selected from the sixth form were waiting with white rosettes to show the company to their seats. There was a general sense of brightness and happiness : every one was well dressed in honour of the occasion. White, with varied coloured ribbons, was worn by smiling young sisters, who, as the raised platform began to fill with boys, might be heard exclaiming, "that is Harry, I hope he won't be nervous," or "here comes Stephen, he does not care a bit what he does." "How pale and ill Oswald Prendergast looks! imagine Charlie singing a solo! Cecil says he will break down." This remark came from one of the Cuthberts.

Weston, the boy whom Gertrude had learned to dislike, was amongst the audience with his mother and elder sisters. Gertrude heard some one say, "I thought your youngest daughter was to come this evening, Mrs. Weston."

"No; Archie could only get us three tickets. Poor Bessie was fearfully disappointed."

"I thought every family had four each," the speaker continued; "we had four, and so had the Cuthberts, and—"

But now the conductor moved his baton, and then the young voices swelled forth in "Hail, Smiling Morn," by Spofforth, which was well received and

rapturously applauded. Others followed, and all went well. Then there was Charlie's solo, "The Blacksmith," by Cherry, which was *encored*, and called forth bursts of applause.

But the joy was gone out of Gertrude's heart, for she felt convinced that her florin had been transferred to Archie Weston's pockets, and that she had the ticket which was by right his youngest sister's.

Gertrude felt as many have felt who compromise and act against their convictions. There was an uneasy sense of wrong, half-defined, and of a way which was crooked ; of evil but weakly resisted, and influence but coldly exerted. She was dissatisfied with herself, and yet had not the courage to face her difficulties. Her thoughts, if expressed in words, would have scarcely taken this shape ; but she wished she had never had the concert ticket, and she wished—how she wished—she had never borrowed that ten shillings from Joanna. Once or twice she met Weston's eye, and disliked the expression she saw there. She felt sure that he knew all about her troubles,—he, that low, ill-behaved boy, who had led Charlie into mischief.

And while these doubts and fears surged in poor Truda's heart, Cecil sat next her, placid and smiling, her glossy hair unruffled, the prettiest girl

in the room, that great authority, Harper major, decreed. And Aunt Helen chattered to Miss Beazley, hardly able to restrain her volubility; and Dr. Prendergast sat with folded arms, reviewing the past, and peopling the platform with faces long since vanished, and hearing voices long since hushed in death.

So the concert went on to its close; and after a hearty burst of "God Save the Queen," and deafening cheers for the Head-master, [and every other master separately, the great event of the College School Concert was over.

CHAPTER VII.

A WINTER'S WALK AT NOON.

THE prizes at the College School were given away the morning after the concert ; and although the occasion was considered less important than at Midsummer, there was always a group of mothers, sisters, and friends seated in front of the platform, where the Headmaster and his colleagues were ranged in solemn scholastic state. On this particular day the chair was taken by an old inhabitant of Minsterholme, who was one of the governing body of the school, and had seen it pass through many phases as man and boy. Old Sir George Plummer was a worthy knight, who had obtained the honour he bore from the fact of his holding office as Mayor of Minsterholme in the year when the Prince of Wales was born. He was a pleasant, kindly person, and had a nod and word of recognition for every one as he followed the Headmaster in his flowing academic gown up the school.

Mr. Birchall began the proceedings by reading out the names of the boys as they stood in their various forms, beginning at the lowest and ascending to the highest. Mr. Birchall was a keen, energetic man of the new order of schoolmasters; and Sir George, reflecting on his far-distant school days, listened with astonishment to the individual knowledge the Headmaster seemed to show of every one of the hundred boys. No one could hope to escape; every detail was sifted, and every weak point laid bare; the high or low place in each form accounted for. Gertrude's cheek flushed with sympathetic shame, when the very first name read out in the third form in Mr. Birchall's sonorous voice, was Prendergast minor. "He has made no effort to escape the honour of the place he holds," Mr. Birchall said. "It may be that he likes it, and finds it easier to keep a foothold there than anywhere else. But I feel bound to say, Prendergast minor could do better if he would, and that his position is mainly the result of absolute indifference and indolence; and these have of late greatly increased." Gertrude turned involuntarily to look for Charlie, and was surprised and vexed to see that his face wore an expression of the utmost unconcern; and Weston, who was next him, was laughing. Mr. Birchall's searching eyes were on them, and he

gave Weston, whose name stood next in order, a more caustic and cutting remark.

Then, as he went on, hearty and unqualified praise was given to a boy who had worked hard against difficulties, and who had satisfied him in every way, both in his conduct and his work in school.

So the review proceeded, the head boy of each form coming up as his name was called, to receive his prize from Sir George Plummer, who said a few words expressing his pleasure in giving it, and that the head-master could report so well of him. Then came the sixth form. This was a large and influential one ; several boys in it of eighteen years old, some of whom were leaving school.

One by one the names were called, and Joanna listened breathlessly for the last. "Harper major ; Prendergast major. Both places honourably won," Mr. Birchall said. "Prendergast major is a formidable rival," Mr. Birchall went on, "and Harper major has worked so well and has been throughout so satisfactory in his school career, that I decided on giving a second prize to this form. Prendergast major has, I ought to say, worked under certain restrictions ; his health has been such that his father has forbidden any over-strain, and I may say that what he has achieved has been very greatly to

his credit. To him, too, the obligation to restrain himself in efforts has been as hard as is to others the necessity of work. If, as I hope, a bright future as a scholar is before Prendergast—and he has my heartiest wishes—he will not see cause to regret the self-discipline which for a time he has been obliged to exercise.”

As Oswald came up to the table, the cheers of the school were deafening. Aunt Helen held one hand over her ear, and with the other made a gesture as if begging for mercy ; meanwhile Cecil saw her brother's lip working with emotion as he stood with his head bent down, waiting for the three handsome volumes of Greek plays which lay ready for him.

To Joanna the whole scene was so novel that she could hardly take it in. The young vociferous voices bewildered her, and it was not till Oswald turned away to resume his place with the books in his hand that she really understood that he had won the highest honour in the school. Her dark, earnest eyes were lighted with interest ; and when Oswald passed her as she sat at the end of the bench, he heard her say, “Oh, I am so glad,” and the boy's heart responded to the sympathy for which he unconsciously hungered.

Certainly Joanna understood him ; he felt it was

so at dinner when she was silent while the others were all discussing what had passed. The remarks, which were quite incapable of hurting Charlie's feelings, jarred upon Oswald's, and it was positive torture to him to be talked over by his aunt and Miss Beazley. His likeness to his uncle was referred to, the precise nature of his head-aches and the character of the fever he had had, compared with that of people Miss Beazley quoted, many of whom, she averred, had suffered from the effects of it all their lives.

"A pleasant prospect for me," Oswald muttered; and then Joanna's quick-coming colour and distressed look told him how well she understood that he hated this public discussion of his concerns. Cecil knew it too, and tried to make a diversion by asking what they should do about accepting an invitation the next day to walk out to a place in the neighbourhood to early dinner with a kind old lady whose idea of enjoyment consisted in the richness and variety of the mid-day feast which she prepared for the young Prendergasts twice or three times a year.

"Joanna's cold is better ; I suppose she may go, Aunt Helen?" Cecil asked.

"You must ask your father's leave about it, Cecil. But the note to Mrs. Watson ought to have

been written before ; pray do it directly after dinner, the dear old lady will think it so remiss."

"I don't wish to go, please, Miss Prendergast," Joanna said. "I would rather stay at home."

"Very well, my dear, you can do as you like ; and I think, with your cold, it is as well to avoid exposure to the late afternoon air."

The move from the dining-room was now made, and Cecil called from the stairs to her brothers, "I suppose both you boys will go to Mrs. Watson's?"

"Not me, thank you," said Charlie ; "I shall be engaged."

"And I certainly am not going," said Oswald.

"But you must go," Cecil said decidedly. "We shall want you to walk home with us, the days are so short."

"Yes, we all know that, as this is the shortest day," Charlie shouted, as he shut the hall door with a loud bang and waited to hear no more.

"I never knew any brothers like ours," Cecil said, "they are so disobliging ; but I will write to Mrs. Watson, and say they are coming, and then they must come ; papa will make them."

"Well," Gertrude said, "it is a dreadfully dull, slow thing to go to Mrs. Watson's ; and one can't eat hot mince pies without feeling much the worse for it. The strawberries and cream are better in the

summer ; but even they become fulsome when dear Watty presses and presses."

"I wish you would not give people *soubriquets* ; it *is* so vulgar !"

"That *is* grand ! Why, Cecil, you invented 'the name Watty, because you said it had a sort of double significance, as she always shows us her Watteau pictures as something new every time we go to Bristowe. But as far as I am concerned, Watty she is, and Watty will remain, I am sorry my dear, if I give you pain."

The next morning, at breakfast, Cecil stopped her father as he was going out on his rounds.

"Papa, Mrs. Watson expects us all to dinner to-day, the boys, and Gertrude, and me. Will you tell the boys you wish them to come ? They both say they won't."

"Oh, nonsense ! I can't have Mrs. Watson's kindness slighted," said Dr. Prendergast. "Both Oswald and Charlie must go ; besides, you girls will want an escort back. Is Joanna included in the invitation ?"

"Oh yes, papa !" Gertrude broke in : "Watty asked the whole party as usual ; but Joan does not wish to go, and Daisy and Sibyl are too young."

"Well, are the boys to go, papa ?" Cecil asked. "Please make it quite clear."

"Of course. In my young days a walk of three miles into the country and a good dinner was a pleasant prospect, but times are changed."

Oswald shrugged his shoulders, and put on his most bored look.

"You hear what papa says, Oswald."

Oswald made some inarticulate answer. Charlie, having finished his breakfast, had left the room before the end of the discussion. It was a delightful winter's morning, with a clear and frosty but not keen air, which was sufficiently cold to cover the little pools with ice and make the roads dry and firm for walking, but not cold enough to paralyse the energies of young healthy people. The charm of a winter's walk at noon has been written in fadeless letters by one who loved the country which God made better far than the town where the hand of man is prominent. At eleven o'clock Oswald was sitting in the schoolroom with his books before him; Joanna was curled up in one of the window seats; while Daisy and Sibyl were engaged in painting the pictures of the *Illustrated London News* with unsparing hands.

In the holidays the little girls considered they were quite entitled to take their place at the schoolroom table; and their belongings of pictures, rejected old colour-boxes, and brushes with a dozen

attenuated hairs in them, did not tend to lessen the chronic disorder which reigned there. Gertrude was not in the room, and presently Cecil appeared.

"Where is Truda?" she asked. "Oh! really, children, you must not make such a dreadful mess here. Look at the paint-water spilt on the tablecloth; it is really horrid!" And Cecil began to gather up a variety of fragments with a reckless hand, sending Sibyl, who was on the brink of tears, to get a cloth to wipe up the pool which stood on the thick baize cover of the table.

"Oswald," she began as she went on with her tidying operations, "we must start at twelve. I hope you will be ready; and where are Gertrude and Charlie?"

"They went out together soon after breakfast," Joanna said. "I saw them go down the road."

"Did Aunt Helen send them anywhere?"

"Yes," Daisy said. "She wanted them to take a note to the Vicarage."

"Well, I hope they will come back soon. Gertrude will have to change her dress. Tell her to make haste when she does come in, Joanna. I am going to practise for half-an-hour. Now, Sibyl and Daisy, you had better go and get ready; Nurse says you must go out this morning. Don't leave a scrap of rubbish behind you."

"Look, Cissy," little Sibyl said ; "is not that soldier painted beautiful? Daisy has made his coat so red."

"And his nose and cheeks too, unfortunately," was Cecil's answer. "I don't think you ought to be allowed to daub like this!"

Little Sibyl's pride in her sister's performance received a sad downfall.

A little sympathetic admiration would have been so precious ; and the child departed slowly, almost sadly, with her treasure in her hand. I do not think we at all measure the happiness which a little genuine interest in a child's life gives. And I think elder brothers and sisters often make mistakes which become difficult to rectify by their carelessness of the feelings of the "little ones"—as the younger members are collectively called in a large family.

"Yes, very grand ; it is a splendid red coat," would have satisfied Daisy and not compromised Cecil's stern sense of truth. The bright colouring of the erect soldier-like figure made it ten times more attractive in the eyes of six-year-old Sibyl, and the too roseate hue of the face and nose was lost on her.

"Such trifles!" I hear some one say who is much inclined to skip what I have just written. But trifles make the sum of human things ; and

there is nothing which needs a more tender and a more gentle touch than the heart of a little child. Keen are its throbs of joy and of sorrow also ; and we should all take care that we give it as many of the first and as few of the last as possible.

Soon Joanna and Oswald were left the only occupants of the schoolroom ; and for a few minutes there was silence. It was broken at last by Joanna :—

“ Here comes Gertrude, but not Charlie, up the road.”

“ What do you say ?” asked Oswald, listlessly throwing down his book as if awaking from a dream.

“ I only said, Gertrude was coming back from the Vicarage. I hope she won't keep Cecil waiting.”

“ Waiting for what ?”

“ Why, you know you are all going to Mrs. Watson's to-day at twelve o'clock.”

“ I am not going,” Oswald said. “ It makes me ill to think of that great dinner in the middle of the day.”

“ But I think you ought to go,” Joanna said in her simple direct way.

“ Give me a good reason for making my head ache for a week.”

"Your father said he wished you to walk with Cecil and Gertrude, and——"

"And what?" Oswald asked.

"I think you need not make yourself ill with eating mince pies; and I think——" she hesitated again—"I think we ought all to learn not to please ourselves sometimes."

"Very good, Joan, excellent preaching; but now for practice. You backed out of going yourself."

Joanna's large wistful eyes looked straight into Oswald's face.

"I don't like going anywhere except to see Mrs. Stuart. I am so awkward and stupid, and no one can possibly want me; but it is quite different about you!"

Joanna spoke with all seriousness and earnestness.

"But, Joan, I want you. If you will go to old Watty's, I will come too. Now, there's a fair offer. Ah! I thought so, good old Joan; you will be like every one else, readier to preach than to practise."

The colour had risen to Joanna's pale face, and her dark eyes grew so dim that she lowered them as Oswald spoke. When he paused she made a great effort, and said—

"If Miss Prendergast will let me, I will go to Mrs. Watson's ; I will go and ask her."

She was leaving the room sorrowfully and sadly when Gertrude came in :

"Oh ! Joan, Joanna, Joan, do hear me make my moan and help me to groan. I have lost one of my gloves, and the button is gone off the other ; and there never was such elastic as is put on my hat, it is broken again, and the big button is lost. Will you lend me a pair of gloves ? black will do ; and while I change my frock, *will* you rummage in the nursery for some elastic and sew it on my hat ? Why, my dear Mrs. Dryasdust, what is the matter ? Has the doctor been beating you ?"

"Don't be so foolish, Gertrude," Oswald exclaimed ; "let Joanna pass. I say, Joan"—but Joanna was gone.

"What is the matter with her ?" Gertrude asked.

"Nothing, except that she is a deal too good to live in this house. Come, be quick, Truda, and make yourself tidy, or Cecil will be in one of her fits of repressed indignation."

"Isn't it provoking of Charlie not to come back ? He will never be in time, and if he does not come, papa will be so angry. Oh dear ! the bothers of life !" said fifteen-year-old Gertrude, rushing off to

forage for a pair of gloves and to find an elastic for her battered felt hat.

Trim and neat, without a hair disarranged, in her blue serge dress and tight-fitting jacket, Cecil stood waiting in the hall for the rest of the party punctually at twelve. The next to appear was Joanna, to whom Cecil said :

"I thought you were going to stay at home."

"Miss Prendergast gave me leave to come," said Joanna humbly ; for Cecil's face wore the cold, set expression, which sometimes marred its beauty.

"Oh ! very well," said Cecil. "Only we must walk fast ; Mrs. Watson is very punctual."

Oswald now appeared, and put on his great coat with the air of a martyr, while Gertrude was not forthcoming.

The clock in the hall pointed to five minutes past twelve when a rush in the corridor above was followed by a frantic descent down the wide stairs—something between a leap and a slide by the help of the banister—which brought Gertrude into collision with Cecil in a very unceremonious way.

"Gertrude, do look what you have done!" Cecil exclaimed, as she stooped to pick up her hat, which was literally knocked off her head.

"Dear me, I am very sorry," Gertrude said. "I

couldn't help it ; and you look as prim as a daisy ; so keep your mind easy !”

Cecil was too angry to speak, but readjusting her hat by the glass behind the stand, she led off at a quick decided pace, Joanna trying to keep up, and Oswald lounging in leisurely fashion behind with Gertrude, whose energy seemed to have expended itself, as she now dawdled listlessly along, looking behind her every minute.

No Charlie had appeared when they passed the Schoolhouse and turned into the road towards Bristowe. At this point they met Mr. and Mrs. Birchall, and the head-master called out a cheerful “Good morning.” He was in a holiday mood, enjoying a walk with his wife, and planning with her a visit to London after Christmas to see things of which Minsterholme only heard faint rumours.

“Come in and see me to-morrow, Prendergast, will you? say about eleven o'clock. I want to have a talk with you.”

Oswald assented, and then he and Gertrude followed the others.

“What can he want you for?” Gertrude said. “I expect it is about the Scholarship.” Then she added: “I wish Charlie would come; he said he was only going round St. Mary's Square to speak to Weston for a minute.”

"I did not mean by bodily force," said Cecil ; "though I dare say you are capable of doing even that."

Gertrude laughed. "Yes, I am strong enough to lift Oswald if I chose. Come, Oswald, do keep up and be agreeable."

Gertrude's spirits rose as quickly as they were depressed, and before they reached Bristowe Cottage she was as full of jest and merriment as ever. She dismissed the anxiety about Charlie with the thought—"If he gets into a scrape, I can't help it ; and perhaps, if papa really does punish him, it will do him good."

The village clock had just struck one when Oswald lifted the latch of a neat white gate, and the whole party walked up the gravel drive skirted by a laurel fence to the house. House and garden were alike faultlessly trim and complete. The very aspect of them had always an unhappy effect on Gertrude, who invariably felt an increase of hoydenish hilarity when that white gate closed behind her. She showed it now by taking a flying leap up the green bank on one side of the drive and coming down with a spring which took her up on the opposite one, not, however, before she had scraped the turf with the toe of one boot, and left a deep indentation with the heel of the other.

"You will be seen,—Gertrude, come down instantly. Oh, Gertrude!" for the spasmodic barking of Mrs. Watson's little skye-terrier gave a decided token that he at least, from his post of observation in the bay window which commanded a view of the little drive from the side of the house, had discovered the approach of his mistress's guests.

Truda descended with another light spring; and saying, "I feel the better for that; I hope the turkey won't be fat," walked almost demurely up to the door where the highly polished brass handle of the bell was reflecting the rays of the winter sun as it shone full upon the cottage. Scarcely had Oswald touched the bell, when the door opened and a smiling maid-servant welcomed the doctor's children and said, as it was past one o'clock, perhaps they would come upstairs at once and take off their hats. Mr. Oswald could go into the drawing-room or rest in the study, whichever he preferred. Oswald elected to wait in the study, and the three girls followed the maid. The cottage had a warm and comfortable atmosphere about it. Carpets and large mats everywhere, little brackets with busts of Garibaldi and Napoleon, Psyche and Homer and the infant Samuel were in every available corner of the passages and landings, interspersed with pictures

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of not the very highest art, and little medallions in oval black frames. Even the bedroom, with its high, luxurious four-post bed, soft, chintz-covered chairs, and old-fashioned couch, was crammed with curiosities ; and one might wonder where a guest who slept in that capacious bed could possibly put his personal property, so full was the room already. A large fire was burning in the grate ; and the maid, looking anxiously at the girls' boots, said she would put them to warm inside the fender, to be nice and comfortable against they went home. Alas ! Cecil alone had remembered that only "house shoes" were thought admissible in Mrs. Watson's drawing-room. She took a neat pair from her pocket ; but Joan looked at her thick boots and said to Gertrude :

"You did not tell me to bring any shoes."

"No, and I have not got any myself ; but never mind, it will be all right."

These remarks were whispered ; but the maid discovered what they meant. She disappeared and quickly returned with two pairs of slippers, one pair lined with fur and the other with scarlet flannel.

"I think they will just do," she said, "they may be a trifle too big ; but it will be more comfortable for you young ladies than to sit with cold feet."

Gertrude was beginning a vehement refusal, but Cecil said :

"Pray do put them on, Gertrude, you know how particular Mrs. Watson is."

"Oh ! 'tis only that mistress couldn't bear the young ladies to be uncomfortable at dinner," the maid said, taking refuge in her mistress's kindness of heart to veil her real reason for offering the slippers.

"Put them on and make haste, it is late, you know, and there is Oswald waiting for us."

The appropriation of the slippers caused some delay. Gertrude was seized with an uncontrollable fit of laughter as poor Joan left one of hers behind her several times on the way downstairs. Oswald was happily oblivious of the delay, as he had taken a book from one of the shelves in the so-called study, and was so much absorbed in its contents that Cecil had to call him twice before he prepared to follow her into the room. The door was opened at last with some ceremony by Jessy, the maid ; and Master Prendergast and Miss Prendergast and Miss —, here Jessy failed, but the blank did as well, for her voice was drowned in Puff's vociferous greeting, as an old lady with a very white cap and a very short rich black silk rose to meet them.

"Welcome to Bristowe! my dears," she said. "What! only four? the Doctor told me, if I asked all, all would come. Well, well, these that are come are welcome. Why, how you all grow, to be sure. Ah! and here is the young gentleman who took honours at school, a little bird whispered that to me. And is this Miss Coninghamé? I knew your grandmamma, my dear, when she was young; you too are very welcome. Now, then, come and have a good toast by the fire till dinner. Puff, what have you got there? Why, Puff, it's one of mistress's slippers, naughty Puff. How did he get it? Puff! Puff!" But here paroxysms of ill-suppressed laughter threatened to suffocate Gertrude, as the little shaggy skye-terrier rushed frantically about with the tempting fur slipper in his mouth and threatened to worry it to pieces. "How strange, ring the bell, one of you: *is* it my slipper, or *is* it a kitten, or——? Yes, my dear, it is very amusing, and how he does enjoy it, dear old Puff. Here, Jessy!" as Jessy appeared not in answer to the bell, but to announce dinner:

"Do see what Puff has got, and take it away from him."

"Dear me! why what is it?" said Jessy.

"It is the slipper you lent me," Joanna found words at last. "They are much too big, and——"

"Why, so they are." And while Mrs. Watson looked on bewildered, Jessy succeeded in snatching the prey from Puff; and poor Joanna, slipping her foot into it once more, shuffled into the dining-room behind Cecil and Gertrude, while Oswald gave his arm to the old lady, who said :

"You are so like your father. I cannot pay you a better compliment, can I?"

Mrs. Watson's attachment to Dr. Prendergast was so strong that she could see no fault in him or in any one belonging to him. He attended her for a chronic complaint; and unless she summoned him, he was careful, in her case as in many others, not to make too frequent visits. But the sound of his carriage wheels stopping at the gate, for even Dr. Prendergast respected the smoothly rolled drive, was the one great event of the old lady's life; and his children's visit at the beginning of the Christmas, Midsummer and Easter holidays, was always looked upon as a great day. At last the party was seated, and grace being said, Jessy and an attendant maid began to hand round the soup. It was rich calves-head soup, commonly called mock-turtle, and was followed by cod and oysters, turkey and roast beef, and then a plum pudding set on fire after the most approved fashion, mince pies, jellies, creams, and a desert too numer-

ous in its variety of preserves and sweet biscuits to mention.

"Well, you all make poor dinners," Mrs. Watson said. "I think your youngest brother is the one who enjoys his meal most. Where is he to-day? I am quite vexed not to see him, he has such a merry open face. Now, my dear Miss Coningham, try that guava jelly. Come, Gertrude, my dear, have you forgotten how to eat preserved ginger? And there are the cocoa-nut-biscuits, I told Jessy there must be plenty of them, because I remembered how your brother Charlie liked them last time. I daresay Gertrude will take a little paper bag full home for her brother; I know what friends they are."

So the long dinner neared its conclusion; and at last the old lady rose and led the way back to the drawing-room. Then a number of albums were produced, bound in light-coloured calf-skin and lettered with gold, the "annuals" of a time gone by. The Waverley Gallery, although so well known to the young Prendergasts, was new to Joanna, and she admired the representations of her favourite "Rebecca," the dark-eyed Jewess of Ivanhoe, whose ministry on the wounded Wilfred was the only bit of romance which had ever been hers to dream over at Ashton. Then, as Joanna was a

stranger, Mrs. Watson herself showed her all the pictures hung closely on the walls.

"This is a real Watteau, my dear; did I ever mention to you, Cecil, how my poor husband became possessed of it?"

"Oh! fifty times at least," Gertrude murmured, when Cecil rose to examine the "little gem," as Mrs. Watson fondly called it.

Histories of the china followed, and also of the large bit of pure white coral carefully protected under a glass shade.

"This, my dear Miss Coningham, was brought by my son when he returned from his first voyage. I prize it beyond all my possessions. Cecil knows why," and tears gathered in the dim eyes of the old mother, who never could forget her sailor boy, with his bright joyous face and sunny hair.

"He never came back from another voyage," Mrs. Watson said. "But I must not talk of my sorrows to-day."

"Was he drowned?" Joanna asked in a low voice. "How sad for you!"

Instantly the withered hand sought hers.

"Oh! yes; and though it is nearly thirty years ago, the trouble comes back as if it was yesterday. Our only one, our only son," she said. "As you are so interested I will show you his picture."

Then Mrs. Watson went to a little ivory box, inlaid with bits of ebony, and taking out of it two keys, she fitted one with uncertain trembling fingers into the lock of a small cabinet which stood on her work-table. Often as the Prendergasts had been at Bristowe, they had never seen that cabinet opened before. To their surprise, it was to Joanna that Mrs. Watson turned when, opening a small, red-leather case, she displayed the miniature of a young midshipman, whose bright smile and frank, open brow made Joan exclaim, "How beautiful! What a noble-looking countenance!"

But Mrs. Watson did not seem to heed what any one said; she continued to gaze on the boyish face with an intentness which was touching. Long, long years had passed since the waves had rolled over those rich auburn curls, and the young head had found its last pillow amongst the coral beds of the southern sea! But the mother's heart was as tender as if he had left her but yesterday; and as she passed her fine cambric handkerchief over the glass after she had pressed it to her lips, Joanna's thought was:

"How happy he was, to be loved like that."

There were other treasures in that cabinet; one, a lock of fine fluffy hair tied with a bit of blue floss silk, and labelled, "Baby's hair."

"Not his," Mrs. Watson said ; "little Amy's, who died when she was six months old. And this," she said, "is a ship my Frank painted when he was only eight years old. It is wonderfully well done."

But a smile which hovered on Gertrude's face, and a whispered, "What a blue sea!" made Mrs. Watson replace the picture in its drawer ; and locking the precious cabinet, she said, "It was time Jessie brought in coffee."

Coffee and frothy cream and sweet biscuits soon appeared ; and then the time came to start for home.

Mrs. Watson did not press her guests to stay ; she was anxious they should reach home before dark. She kissed all the girls at parting ; and when the accustomed form had been gone through of, "Thank you very much for your kindness," the old lady resigned herself to her arm-chair and her dreams, and remarked to Puff that "Young people were tiring, though it was pleasant to have them."

The young people themselves were, so to speak, letting off the steam of their spirits after so long a repression.

The winter sky was bright and clear, mellowed into a deep crimson and saffron towards the west, where a planet was shining in serene majesty. A young moon was hanging its silver bow low in the

heavens, and the frosty air was so still that the sound of the children's voices was distinct and clear. After the first mile homewards had been passed, it became evident that Joanna was very tired ; and Oswald, as she hung heavily on his arm, reproached himself for his selfishness in bringing her at all.

"Let us carry her chair-fashion," Gertrude said. "She will never be able to drag herself home."

"Oh ! yes, I shall ; I am sorry I am so stupid, and I don't want to make you walk slowly."

"Do you know, Joan, it is always better to walk fast when you are tired ; dawdling only makes the way seem longer !"

Joanna made an effort to quicken her pace, and succeeded in keeping up a little more closely to the two girls. So another mile was passed, and they reached a turn where a path led over some fields, and which Gertrude was sure was a short cut into the town. Cecil was doubtful, and Oswald thought the road was easier walking ; there were several stiles to get over ; and as Joanna was so tired they would be much worse for her than the straight high road. Moreover, the field path led near the marshes, and was sure to be swampy and muddy.

"Not in a frost like this," Gertrude said. "I

shall go this way anyhow, and we shall see who gets to the corner of the Priory Road first."

"I am sure I am not coming with you," said Cecil; "you will have to go by yourself."

"I know I shall. Good-bye."

"Gertrude," Oswald shouted, "come back!"

"Truda, it is getting very late—Gertrude!" Cecil echoed; but Gertrude's fleet steps had already carried her half across the first field, and she only called in her ringing clear voice, "Who will be home first?"

There was nothing left for the others but to pursue their way homewards without her. Joanna in vain entreated Oswald to follow her—she could get along perfectly well without him; and Cecil, after repeating that there never was such a wilful, head-strong girl as Gertrude, and that it served her right to be left to herself, walked on in front of Oswald and Joanna, stifling an uneasy fear as to what her father would say *if*, when they reached home, Gertrude had not arrived.

Meanwhile Gertrude pursued her way across the fields in the gloom. At first she tried to sing, but somehow her voice would not avail her so well as usual. When she had mounted and descended the second stile, she was conscious of a sense of solitude, and that it was less agreeable to be alone in

the twilight than in the day-time. The sudden movement of an old horse under a tree, standing gaunt and leafless against the sky, made her start and her heart beat fast. She rallied quickly, however, and quickened her pace to something that was almost a run. As she did so she heard a voice, a man's voice, calling, and saw in the dim light a figure hastening towards her across the fields from the marshes which lay to her right. Gertrude was really frightened now. She ran, but the man ran too ; and as, half faint with terror, she reached the next stile, the voice sounded quite close to her, " Stop !" and on looking round she saw her pursuer was one of the fur-capped Spiers !

CHAPTER VIII.

DUCK-SHOOTING ON THE MOOR.

"I SAY, missie, will you tell me where I can get a doctor—the nearest doctor?"

Gertrude tried to control her trembling voice, and answer civilly : "Mr. Green lives at this end of the town, in Market Street."

"Well, I wish you would run on and send him, then, for there's been a bad accident out yonder, close by them pollards, you see ; and one of the young gents is that crazy with fright he don't know what to do with hisself. There, I hope the blame won't be put on me—just as likely as not."

"Who is hurt ? what is it ?" Gertrude asked with a sort of horrid foreboding that the accident, whatever it was, concerned her, although she dare not shape the thought into words.

"Well, if you'll go after the doctor I'll go back to 'em ; they be all alone, and one of 'em is wild

with fright ; but make haste, will 'ee !" the youth said in his coarse rough tones. " It ain't no fault of mine if they asked me to go a duck-shooting ; why not ? I didn't tell 'em to climb over the fence with a loaded gun ; did I ? I wasn't such a fool."

" I will go directly," Gertrude said ; thankful to get rid of her companion, and intensely relieved when the great slouching fellow began to retrace his steps.

" Make haste, will 'ee," he shouted, in parting ; " it's the doctor's son that's shot, and you had best let him know too."

Whether the dim light prevented Spiers from recognising Gertrude before, I cannot say ; but now, as she turned towards him with a cry of distress, the rough voice sent back the words : " Why, I believe it's the young chap's sister, as luck would have it !"

" It's Charlie ; it's Charlie !" Gertrude almost screamed. " Oh ! is he dead ? is he dead ?" But no answer came ; and the poor girl, like one in a frightful dream, ran towards the town with a speed which was marvellous. Still it seemed to her as if she should never reach the first gas-lamp standing at the end of the field path, and marking the boundary of the town. Along the road she rushed, turning into Market Street with trembling legs

that almost refused to carry her, and at last pulled the bell of No. 6, Mr. Green's house.

"Is—is—Mr. Green at home?" she asked of a little page in buttons, who was ready with his answer in the pert fashion common to all little boys in buttons, especially at a doctor's door.

"He's at dinner; can you leave your message?"

"Oh! but he must come now—this moment—instantly. My brother!—there has been an accident out on the marshes. Oh, pray, pray, let me see Mr. Green!"

"Who shall I say, miss?" asked the boy. But Gertrude pushed past him, and directed by the scent of beefsteak and onions to a door on the right, opened it abruptly, and much to the astonishment of the doctor and his wife, exclaimed:

"Will you come at once! My brother—my brother has been shot!"

Mr. Green rose just in time to prevent Gertrude from falling down utterly exhausted, and placing her in a chair, said to his wife:

"Do you know who it is?" Mrs. Green, a prim, precise little person, in a grey silk dress, put her glass in her eye, and said:

"I think it is one of the Prendergasts—Dr. Prendergast's children. How very extraordinary!"

Gertrude, panting and breathless, struggled to

her feet. "We must go at once; I know the way."

"My dear young lady, you must try to compose yourself. Rest quietly there and take some wine and water while I go and make the necessary preparations. A gun accident, you say?"

"Yes; and can you let papa know?"

"Dr. Prendergast?" Mr. Green asked with a tone of respect in his voice due to the name of the head and chief of the profession in Minsterholme. "Certainly; I will send the carriage round for him; had you not better return in it?"

"No. Oh, no! I must show you the way; it is out in the Laleham fields, I know the place. Do—do make haste!"

"Mr. Green will be as quick as possible," his wife said. "Pray, Miss Prendergast, drink this."

Gertrude swallowed the wine, and then walked up and down in the little back dining-room till Mr. Green returned. He was prompt and decided, and had ordered a small pale-faced assistant to accompany him, who was bearing a mystic-looking black bag.

"We cannot drive to the spot, I fear," he said.

"No. Oh! no—but do come!"

Gertrude was now in the street, and was running fast in the direction of the Laleham fields again.

The doctor found it difficult to keep up with her, and the assistant lagged far behind.

"I thought this would be the nearest point," Mr. Green said as the lamp-post came in sight, where a gate led into the fields. "I ordered my carriage to come here with Dr. Prendergast, if my messenger is so fortunate as to find him at home. Do not agitate yourself more than you can help, my dear," Mr. Green said ; "things may not be as bad as you fear, and calmness is always most desirable."

"Calmness!" the very word seemed to excite Gertrude still more ; then, springing away from Mr. Green, she uttered a cry of delight, for she discovered in two figures moving at a brisk pace along the high road, Mr. Hastings and Mrs. Stuart.

"O!" she exclaimed, "Mrs. Stuart, Mrs. Stuart! Charlie has been shot, and I am going with the doctor to find him. Oh! will you come?"

Mrs. Stuart drew the poor child's hand within her arm, and saying : "Yes, of course I will come with you, my dear," left Mr. Green to follow with her brother and hear what particulars he could give him.

The pressure of Mrs. Stuart's hand and the sound of her voice soothed poor Gertrude.

"I am so thankful I met you," she gasped. "I feel as if I were dreaming—as if it could not be true. I left the others to go home by the road,

and said I should get home first. O, Mrs. Stuart!" she said, shuddering, "do you think he is dead? I have done nothing for him. I have never, never helped him to be good—only made him worse; you don't know how wicked I have been: borrowing money for him, and——"

"My dear child, we must not go over the past now; let us pray to God to help us in the present. When we reach the place where your brother is, we must all try to do our best, and not lose our self-control. It is a hard lesson for you, Gertrude; I am so sorry for you; but let us believe that God will show us His love, even in a trouble so great as this."

The clump of pollards on which Gertrude kept her eye steadily fixed seemed far off—a black mass in the dim light—for it was almost dark now. At last they were near enough to hear voices, and Gertrude ran forward eagerly, and then drew back; after all it was dreadful to face the worst. Two men were seen advancing, bearing something on a hurdle; they were labourers returning from work who had come to the help of the boys, and Charlie had been lifted on to the hurdle which had been lying near. He was groaning heavily; and the small pocket lantern, which Mr. Green's assistant had taken from his bag and lighted, showed

a pale face convulsed with suffering. Could this be Charlie? But the countenance of a tall boy who stood near was even more terrible in its expression. Like all boys of his character, Weston was a coward; and his distress was not so much caused by the pain of his friend, as by terror as to what blame his share in the matter might bring to him. He began a loud, confused account of what had passed, till Mr. Hastings laid his hand on his arm, saying :

"This is not the place for explanation : if you can give no assistance, walk on home, and do not increase our trouble."

"Here, come on," Spiers said, taking Weston's arm familiarly ; "I hope you'll clear me, that's all. I didn't get tight at the Three Crows, though you did."

Weston shook off his accuser angrily, and slunk away, his terror subsiding into sullen silence.

Meanwhile Mr. Green had moved poor Charlie into a better position, and he was covered with Mr. Hastings's great coat ; then he said, faintly,

"Thank you ; where am I?"

"We are taking you home," Mr. Hastings said. "My poor boy, you must try to bear the movement ; where is the pain the worst?"

"In my leg, I think ; but it is everywhere. Am

"I dying?" he asked in a trembling voice. "Where is Truda? I want to speak to Truda."

"I am here, Charlie, dear Charlie," Gertrude said, trying to command her voice.

Nothing more could be done for the boy in that position, and the sad procession moved on.

Gertrude, with her hand fast locked in Mrs. Stuart's, walked as if she were in a dream, unable to realise what had happened, and saying every now and then, "What will papa say? Oh! what will papa say?"

Mrs. Stuart attempted no set phrases of comfort; but when her brother asked Spiers to give his version of the accident, she pressed Gertrude close to her and prayed for her earnestly and silently.

Jim Spiers was quiet and subdued by Mrs. Stuart's presence, and gave Mr. Hastings as they went on a somewhat more connected account of what had happened.

"The young gentlemen wanted a day's duck-shooting; there was no harm in that. I let Master Prendergast have a gun on hire for a trifle; Mr. Weston had one of his own. They had good sport, and went into the Three Crows, down at Laleham, for a bit of bread and cheese. The young gents was tired, and had sat a longish time, ordering a pretty stiff lot of beer. They was rather tightish,

and then they had some words about who was to pay. However, they settled that ; and then they took up their guns to walk home. They was rather glum with each other, and Mr. Weston was very nasty to Master Prendergast. At last they came to the hurdle fence ; and as the two was scrambling over it, not so steady as they might be, one of the guns went pop, and Mr. Weston called out : 'He's shot in the leg !' Mr. Weston had no business to be walking when he was tight, with his gun loaded ; and he was roughish to Master Prendergast all along."

"That will do, Spiers," Mr. Hastings said ; "we do not want to know who was to blame now."

"Well, sir, I do hope you ain't a going to say a poor chap like me is to blame ; I am sure we thought the young gent was dead at first, and I runned off as hard as I could to get a doctor ; for Mr. Weston did nothing but curse and swear and call out as if he was mad. Then I met missie, and she went on for the doctor as I came back to the young gents. I did my best ; and it'll be hard if I get the blame."

They had now come to the gate leading into the road where Mr. Green's brougham was waiting.

"Is papa here ?" was Gertrude's first question.

"No ;" the coachman told his master. He had been to the Priory as ordered, but Dr. Prendergast

had not come back from his rounds. He had been summoned to a place for consultation, the servant said, some miles away.

"Did you leave any message at the Priory?" Mr. Green asked.

"Yes, sir. I told the servant there had been an accident."

With great difficulty the hurdle with its burden was laid across the brougham. There was only room in the carriage for Mr. Green to accompany Charlie, who seemed to be now unconscious of anything that was passing. The coachman was ordered to drive slowly, and those on foot kept up with the brougham, and thus at last the Priory was reached. A figure crouching at the doorstep was roughly pushed aside by Mr. Green's assistant; Gertrude saw it was Weston. A group of pale, frightened, anxious faces were collected in the hall when Mr. Green entered, saying, "Is Dr. Prendergast come home?"

"No," it was Aunt Helen who spoke. "What is it?"

"His son has met with a serious gun accident; where shall we take him?"

Aunt Helen had sunk down on one of the hall chairs, and could only speak in broken murmurs.

"A room is ready," Cecil said; "we knew some-

thing was wrong. Nurse will show you the way. How is he?"

Mr. Green wasted no time ; he said a few words to the old servant, and then he and his assistant carried Charlie into the house he had left in all the freshness of health and strength in the morning. Oswald advanced a little from the stairs ; his face was of livid paleness. One look at his brother, and he tottered back overcome with a horrid sensation of faintness ; and he would have fallen if Joanna had not caught his arm.

"So stupid," he murmured ; "but I can't help it ; it is always the same."

"He is dead ! he is dead !" Aunt Helen cried. She was utterly helpless, and could not control herself. Cecil alone maintained her composure, but her heart throbbed with pain unknown before as she followed her brother upstairs.

It is often so. The members of a family live on from day to day with no change in the accustomed routine of home. Disputes and quarrels too often arise ; hard words are exchanged ; complaints of each other are constantly made by brothers of sisters, and sisters of brothers.

Then an illness or an accident comes, and the real bond of family love asserts itself for the sufferer. All past grievances are forgotten, and there is only

one desire, which becomes greater than any other, that life should be spared. Trouble of this kind reveals in many cases a love, the depth and strength of which is unsuspected in prosperous days.

Dr. Prendergast came home a few minutes after his boy had been taken upstairs, all unconscious of what had happened. He was turning from the opened door to give some directions to the coachman, when Gertrude flew towards him, and throwing herself into his arms, said, "Papa! papa! Charlie is shot!" And the poor girl burst into a passion of weeping.

Her father gently disengaged himself, and went into the dining-room. There he found Joanna sitting by Oswald, who was extended on the sofa perfectly powerless to act, for every time he raised himself his head swam. Miss Prendergast had gone upstairs with the little ones who were frightened and crying.

"Where is Charlie?" asked Dr. Prendergast.
"Who is with him?"

"Mr. Green and Mr. Hastings and Mrs. Stuart; we met them on our way back."

"How did it happen?"

"Charlie was duck-shooting, and a loaded gun went off as they were climbing over a fence."

"Duck-shooting! I thought you all went to Mrs. Watson's to-day."

Dr. Prendergast covered his face with his hand, and then bending over Oswald, said, "Poor boy!" He pitied the physical weakness which was constitutional in Oswald, and made him unable to bear the sight of suffering, although he could bravely endure any bodily pain which affected himself.

Gertrude followed her father upstairs. He entered the room where Charlie lay, and signed to her to stay outside. In a few minutes Nurse came out for something that was wanted, and Gertrude asked, "How is he?"

Then Nurse told her to go into the drawing-room; she hardly knew how he was. He was alive and the doctors were examining the wound. Poor Gertrude felt hopelessly wretched as she waited in the passage; she was cold and faint from exertion and excitement, and sank down on the floor, her head leaning against the wall.

At last the bedroom door opened again, and this time it was Mrs. Stuart. She nearly stumbled over Gertrude, and stooping down, put her arm round her.

"My poor child, you must come and have some tea. Where are the others?"

"I don't know. O, Mrs. Stuart! will Charlie die?—must he die?"

"God only knows, Gertrude. For many days, at the best, the result must be uncertain. We must all pray for patience."

"If Charlie dies, I can't bear it!" Gertrude said. "Oh! it is all that dreadful Weston's fault. He led him into mischief, and now he has killed him."

"Hush, dear Gertrude; we must not go over all this now. Come to the dining-room, and I will make the tea if Miss Prendergast is not able to do so."

"Cecil is of use in Charlie's room," Gertrude wailed; "she is so quiet and self-possessed; and I am no use, and no good to anybody. Even Joanna is looking after Oswald; he is so faint and ill. But nobody wants me. Aunt Helen took Sibyl and Daisy with her; they were all crying together. Oh! how dreadful it is."

At this moment Miss Prendergast came hurrying up the passage. She was trembling and excited, and talking in a confused, tremulous way; she must see Charlie, she said. The little ones were gone to the nursery with one of the maids, and now she must see Charlie. She was pressing on towards the door, when Mrs. Stuart gently prevented her.

"I think," she said, "you had better not go in there just yet. Will you come downstairs with me, and let us give these poor worn-out children some tea."

Aunt Helen consented, and Mrs. Stuart went into the kitchen and speaking kindly to the young servants who were there, and who were sharing in the general panic, asked them to bring some hot water for the urn, and she would make the tea,

Oswald sprang up when Mrs. Stuart came, and Joanna fastened on her dark eyes.

"How is he?"

"There is not much to tell," was the answer; "Charlie is in God's hands; we must try to be patient."

Miss Prendergast sat by the fire in a rocking-chair, talking and crying, and relating all the stories of gun accidents she could recall. It was positive torture to poor Oswald, and having swallowed a cup of tea he said he should go to his room. Just as he was attempting to do so, Cecil appeared with Mr. Hastings; she was very pale but calm, and Mrs. Stuart drew her towards her and kissed her, saying, "You have borne up bravely, my child. Try to take something now, and then I think you three girls had better go to bed."

"I am going back to papa," Cecil said; "he likes me to be there."

"May I not see Charlie?" Gertrude asked beseechingly. "Please, Mrs. Stuart, let me see him."

"My dear, it would only distress you, I fear,"

said Mr. Hastings ; " and there is nothing that you can do."

" Cecil can do something for him ; why mayn't I ? and oh ! I love Charlie better than she does," Gertrude said, passionately. " And I know if he understands anything, he would like to see me."

" You had better not go into the room, Gertrude," Oswald said. He was leaning against the back of a chair, irresolute whether to go or stay.

" But, Mrs. Stuart, I must see Charlie. Oh ! you are always kind. Do, pray, let me see him."

" Very well, my dear ; but, Gertrude, you must be calm."

Poor Gertrude's heart nearly failed her when at last she was in the room where the boy lay. All her life that scene would be written on her memory. Her father turned his head as the door opened, and Gertrude saw a look there which told her he had little hope. Mr. Green and the assistant were preparing some bandages at a little table, and Nurse was wiping the drops of perspiration from Charlie's brow.

" Charlie !" Gertrude said.

The large dim eyes were fixed on Gertrude with a wistful, enquiring look.

" Come here, Truda—close. That ten shillings——"

"Oh! never mind that now, dear Charlie."

"Yes, yes, I must—my ball will sell for something; so will my jersey—it is quite new. Sell them, and pay—you know, and, Truda——"

"My dear boy, do not try to talk," his father said; for Charlie's voice came in broken gasps.

"This is nobody's fault but mine. Jim Spiers only did what I asked him. O Truda!" The lips quivered and tears wetted the long dark lashes of those large eyes. "O Truda! I don't want to die. I should like to live, do you think I shall die?"

Poor Gertrude could no longer repress her sobs, and Mrs. Stuart drew her away; but Charlie said: "Kiss me, Truda; and remember this is all my own fault; stoop down close, Truda."

Gertrude obeyed.

"Don't let any one be blamed; don't let any one—say——"

He could not utter another word, and Mrs. Stuart led Gertrude gently away. She took her to her own room and helped her to undress, smoothing the long tangled golden hair, and by her very touch conveying the sympathy she felt.

When she was lying down in her bed, utterly exhausted, Mrs. Stuart knelt by her, and taking one of her hands, prayed a few simple, earnest words,

which seemed to bring them into the presence of the Lord. When she had ended, Gertrude said, "I don't want to be alone; I wish Joan would come and sleep with me; it will be such a long, dreadful night. Must I lie here?"

"My dear, you have gone through a great deal, and unless you try to be quiet you will be ill."

"Oh! Mrs. Stuart," Gertrude said helplessly, "I am all in a miserable whirl, and feel as if I were still running along that field for the doctor. And then I see Charlie's face as the lantern shone on it. Oh! it can't be all true."

"Shall I ask Joanna to come to you?" Mrs. Stuart said; "I am sure she will do what you wish."

Mrs. Stuart withdrew her hand which Gertrude held fast in hers, and left the room. She found Joanna watching at the door.

"May I go to Gertrude?" she asked.

"It is just what she wishes. But try to calm her, my dear; and had you not better undress and lie down by her?"

"I don't know where my things are," said poor Joanna. "You know Charlie was taken into my room."

"Yes, I remember; let us go to the nursery and see if we can find what you want. This is very trying for you, Joan," Mrs. Stuart said.

"Oh! I am so sorry for them all. Oswald is gone to bed; he felt so ill he could not sit up. Only Cecil seems of any use; I wish I could help."

"My dear, I think you will be of great use. That poor child looks to you for comfort; and I think, Joanna, you can direct her to the unfailing Refuge."

"I think—I hope so," Joan said modestly.

No thought of herself or personal inconvenience entered Joanna's mind. She did as she was advised, and Mrs. Stuart was pleased and touched to see her turn back as she was leaving the nursery when she was ready for bed, and kiss the two little sleepers, Daisy and Sibyl, who had forgotten the trouble about poor Charlie in sleep, and lay serene and quiet in their little beds.

"Is that you, Joan?" Gertrude asked, as Joanna lay down beside her.

"Yes, Truda. Try not to cry so much, you will make yourself ill."

"Oh, Joan, Joan! it is not only that Charlie has been shot; it is not only that, bad as it is; but I have known for a long time that dreadful Weston has been getting money out of him. That ten shillings you gave me was for him, and I ought to have made Charlie tell papa he was in debt."

"I had almost forgotten the ten shillings, Truda ; pray do not think of that now."

"It's not the money itself, it is that I might have helped Charlie ; and I did everything to make him worse. I used to run down and open the door for him when he came in late ; and then I took that concert ticket—that horrid concert ticket—which he bought of Weston, I am certain. And now—now he will die, and I shall never never be happy again."

"Let us pray to God to spare his life, Gertrude ; and I think He will."

"I can't pray," said Gertrude—somehow I *can't* ; no words will come. I have tried, but it is only 'Charlie, Charlie, so bright and active.' Oh, Joan ! I was so proud to see him in his new football suit ; and now to think of him as he is and that wicked Weston has killed him. But I forgot—he told me I was to say it was his own fault ; and so you must not tell any one I mentioned Weston's name. Oh ! my head aches so dreadfully," poor Gertrude said, "and I can't keep still."

"Shall I repeat something to you that comforts me, Gertrude, when I am troubled ?"

"You never had a trouble like this, Joan."

"No, not exactly like it ; but I have felt very sad—sometimes wanting love so much, Truda,

thinking how nice it must be to be sure of love, as you all are."

"We have not been kind to each other," Gertrude said; "I wonder you think we do love each other so much."

"Oh, but I know the love is there; I see it to-night; whereas if I—" Joan stopped: "I mean I am nobody's *very own*. Well, when I lie awake thinking of this, I say over to myself a great deal of the Bible which I used to learn for grandmamma; and you can't think how it helps me. I will say one of my chapters to you, Gertrude—one out of Isaiah; shall I?"

"Oh! I don't know. Isaiah is so difficult; isn't it?"

"Not all of it. I think it is the most beautiful poetry; and then it is so real and true, like the voice of a friend speaking, you know."

Gertrude still moaned and sighed, and refused comfort. Then Joanna began in her low voice words which seemed almost spontaneously to fall from her lips: "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God." As she went on, the words seemed to bring their own power with them; and when she had finished that marvellous chapter, Gertrude was quieter, and whispered, "Say it again, about 'the grass withering.'"

Joanna obeyed, and before she had concluded Gertrude had fallen asleep.

Mrs. Stuart returned to the Vicarage to make some arrangements there, and to tell the servants that she should pass the night at the Priory. Her heart ached for the children upon whom this trial had fallen ; and Gertrude's mournful wail of duty unfulfilled and responsibility neglected, only made her feel more full of sympathy for her. She knew how bitter self-reproach always is when the power to do something for the good of those we love seems to be taken from us for ever.

As Mrs. Stuart drew near the Priory again, she saw a tall figure lounging against the wall of the Schoolhouse garden. The scent of a cigar reached her as she passed, and she had no difficulty in recognising Weston. In the general distress and panic he had been forgotten, and Mrs. Stuart's heart did not soften towards him as he said in a would-be careless and indifferent tone :

“Do you know how Prendergast is?”

The cowardly terror Weston had showed at first, and the shock of seeing Charlie stretched apparently lifeless before him, had vanished, and he now took up quite a different tone.

“I think you are Mrs. Stuart,” he said, as she paused on his addressing her. “I don't like to

trouble the servants at the Priory ; perhaps you can tell me how Charlie is ?”

Mrs. Stuart’s gentle voice could be very decided in its tone, and she replied :

“ He is lying between life and death. God only knows how it will end.”

Weston winced a little ; then trying to say carelessly, “ Thank you ; good-evening,” he moved away. He was joined almost immediately by Jim Spiers.

“ I say, Spiers, it’s a queer look-out for us if things go badly with him,” nodding his head in the direction of the Priory.

“ Well, I don’t see what you mean by that. It was your gun that went off, and you was nagging and quarrelling all the way from the Three Crows. But then accidents will happen, and what’s done can’t be undone. I dare say no questions will be asked, and if they are——”

“ Yes, that’s just it, you can say you don’t know anything about the gun.”

“ Well, one went pop, and t’other didn’t,” said Spiers. “ One was your’n and one wasn’t ; it ain’t much odds ; anyhow, mum is the word.”

“ Yes, that’s it,” said Weston, relieved to find that Spiers had taken his meaning.

“ Mum is the word ; but you see, Mr. Weston, a poor chap like me——”

"Oh! I'll make that all right. I've got a school suit as good as new; it would just fit you, Jim. You can call for it at the back door of our place some morning early."

"All right, Mr. Weston; but I look more at chink than clothes, you see."

"Oh, well; I'll throw a few shillings into the bargain. Do you understand?"

And with this bargain concluded Weston went home.

He found his mother lying on the sofa, and his sisters altering some white tarletan dresses in anticipation of a party at a house in the neighbourhood. Mrs. Weston looked up from the third volume of her novel and exclaimed, "How late you are, Archie!" while his sisters begged him to take care, and not put his boots near their dresses.

"Is there any tea?" he asked.

"I really don't know; you had better go into the dining-room and see for yourself."

Weston did as she suggested, and was soon heard ringing the bell violently for the servant. She was not at all pleased to have the trouble of bringing in tea again, and did not hurry herself. Weston began to be insolent to her; and then she retaliated as maids will.

"She was not going to work herself to death for

him, as poor Annie Wood had, and had been laid in her grave only that morning. He might just rail as he liked, she should not bring the tea till the water boiled."

Weston was left to his own reflections. They were apparently not very pleasant. He walked up and down the room, pausing once or twice at the sideboard; and taking some brandy from a bottle which had been carelessly left there, he tried to set his fears and uneasiness to rest. But he had scarcely thrown himself back in his chair when his eldest sister came flying in with a note in her hand.

"Archie, do you know Charlie Prendergast has been shot, and there is no hope for him? This is a note from Mrs. Cuthbert to mamma, she says, 'We heard the poor boy was out duck-shooting with your son. I hope he is not hurt.' Archie, do come and tell mamma what you know. It is so dreadful for the Prendergasts."

"I wish you would mind your own business," was the uncivil reply.

"Yes," he resumed, as his mother, roused to exertion, came into the room—"I was duck-shooting with Prendergast; he climbed over a fence, and the gun went off. Pray don't bother me; I am dead beat and shall go to bed."


He was deaf to the torrent of questions and ex-

clamations which were poured forth, and lounged up to his room, leaving his mother to exclaim that she could do nothing with him, and that she must hand him over to his uncle, for he was a constant trouble to her.

Mrs. Weston was one of those people who occasionally give vent to their anxieties and complaints in a great many words, and even tears, and then subside again, and apparently think that they have done their part.

Mrs. Cuthbert's note was read several times, and various comments made ; and then, with a passing remark about poor Annie Wood, and how unfortunate it was for her mother, Mrs. Weston and her children separated for the night.

Archie Weston's sleep was by no means untroubled. He started up several times and tossed and turned on his pillow. Death presents to a boy like him many terrors ; and he felt if Charlie did but live, it would not be so bad, but to die was dreadful. Then the picture arose of Charlie as he knew him just a year ago—bright, careless, and happy ; and how he had laughed at him, and scoffed at his scruples about going to Spiers', about resorting to dishonourable means in school-work, about using bad words—a habit, alas ! far too common amongst schoolboys.



Weston knew Charlie had changed ; and dull and dead as his conscience was in that long dreary night, its voice seemed to grow stronger and would be heard.

About eight o'clock he was just falling into a doze when the great bell of St. Catherine's church struck out. He sprang up and listened intently. Then as it tolled slowly as for a soul that had passed away in the night, a terrible fear laid hold on the boy. He covered his ears with the clothes, and lay shivering and trembling with dread and apprehension. It was a moment in his life when the tempter is busy, and does his best to whisper peace when there is no peace.

"How could I help the gun going off? Why need I be in such a fright? What a fool I am ! If Jim Spiers keeps his word nobody will know, unless Charlie has told."

For Weston shuddered as he remembered the words which had escaped the boy as he fell : "Oh, Weston ! take care ; you've shot me." But only Jim Spiers heard or knew ; and if any one did know, it was only an accident which happened every day. Why need he be afraid ? It would all be forgotten soon enough.

So the flattering unction was laid to his soul ; and the event which might have been a turning-

point in his life for good, was to come and go and leave no trace behind.

He had, doubtless, many disadvantages. His father, Colonel Weston, had died in India, and his mother was indolent and singularly unfit to deal with a boy like him. She had come to Minsterholme for the sake of education, and having sent her son to the College school for a very small fee, did not, I fear, concern herself much about him. She apparently cared a great deal more about pressing her way into society, and the appearance of her two elder girls.

The Westons' was not a happy home, and it might be said of the members of their household: "The way of peace had they not known ; there was no fear of God before their eyes."

I wonder, if we could look closely into the homes of England, to how many those words would apply? For, shirk the question as we may, and seek as we may for the causes of family troubles and disputes and sorrows, we are brought at last to confess that peace, dove-like and blessed, comes in all its beauty and loveliness only with the fear of God. When that is the delight of the eyes, the other shall follow as the joy of the heart.

CHAPTER IX.

RESTORATION.

THE passing bell which had sounded in Arthur Weston's ears so ominously was not tolled for Charlie Prendergast. Long, dark, and weary days followed the accident, for the family at the Priory. The boy lay between life and death, and his father's face was sad and grave as, in answer to numerous inquiries made by such of his patients whose cases were too serious to be given up into other hands, he said :

“ He still lives ; and while there is life, there is hope.”

The girls scarcely knew how the days passed. Cecil was the least to be pitied, for she was useful and active—writing notes for her father, answering questions, ready always with her head and hand. Aunt Helen, too, found diversion from anxiety in admitting a few chosen friends and relating the story of the accident again and again. The three in the

schoolroom were the most to be pitied. Suspense was in itself hard for Gertrude to bear ; and Oswald would sit with a book before him for hours, scarcely conscious of the words he looked at, and chafing under Gertrude's restlessness and continual running in and out to glean some news from the sick-room, where all interest centred. Joanna sat quietly knitting or working, and was the only one who seemed to think some attention to poor little Daisy and Sibyl was necessary.

The one event to be looked forward to was Mrs. Stuart's daily visit. She was constantly in the house, and in Charlie's room ; but she always contrived to spend half an hour in the school-room, trying to cheer the inmates with her presence.

Gertrude always hung on her words the most securely, and would subside into comparative quiet when she was with her.

Grief and anxiety are new to the young, and so are all the little painful reminders that, however we may weep and lament, the outside world goes on its way ; and that the current of life is in no way disturbed by the trouble that has fallen on us.

Gertrude felt this most forcibly one evening, about six o'clock, when the carriages and flies of Minsterholme were all in motion conveying the

youthful part of the community to a large party given by a gentleman in the neighbourhood in honour of his only son's birthday.

"What a number of flies are going past this evening," Joanna said after a pause.

"Yes ; it is the 23rd, the night of the Stanleys' party."

"Oh dear !" And then Gertrude leaned her head against the pane as she sat in the window-seat and remembered how she had delighted in the thoughts of this party ; how the white muslin lay in a great heap in the work-room, where Miss Hall, the dressmaker, had been arranging with Aunt Helen the number of flounces, and the length of the skirt the very day of the accident, a week ago now. Christmas Day was at hand ; it was a comfort to think it fell on a Sunday, and that no particular demonstration could in any case have been possible. Poor Gertrude was impatient in her grief as in everything else.

The great question of whether it was best to amputate the injured leg or not, still remained undecided. The very thought was intolerable to Gertrude. Charlie, a hopeless cripple for the rest of his life ; Charlie, with all his eager rapid movements, his bright hilarious enjoyment of cricket and football, to be going about on a crutch to the

end of his days. It was too hard—too terrible. “Oh! would it not be better that he should die?”

These thoughts became unbearable; and Gertrude started up, and leaving her position by the window, went in a despairing, impetuous way to the door, and closing it sharply behind her, left Oswald and Joanna alone.

Joanna gathered up her work as if preparing to follow her, when Oswald roused himself:

“Where are you going?”

“It is nearly tea-time,” she answered; “and I promised the children I would take them down this evening.”

“Oh! not to tea; they are such a nuisance.”

“They are very dull, poor little things!” Joanna said. “Nurse is, of course, never with them, and all their arrangements are upset.”

“Everything is upset,” Oswald said fretfully. “I wonder how long this will go on. If one could only do something—but I am the most useless mortal.”

“There is nothing to be done for Charlie,” Joanna said. “Mrs. Stuart says the room ought to be as quiet as possible; no one, except Cecil, can be of use.”

“You are of use,” Oswald said; “you are a model of patience. Why don’t you go and stay at

the Cuthberts, as they wish? it is awfully hard for you to be in this wretched house."

Joanna raised her dark eyes to Oswald's face :

"You do not think I could leave you all, now you are in such trouble," she said, her lips quivering. "I am so sorry for you ; it must be so hard to bear."

"Yes," said Oswald, "it is hard to think of that poor fellow lying there ; and—" Oswald's voice faltered—"I have set myself up so much above him, and cared for nothing but myself—and all this wretched work," he added, pushing away his Homer, and burying his face in his hands as he sat by the table. "You see, Joan, I never helped poor Charlie one bit ; I knew that fellow Weston would lead him into mischief, and I never interfered. If I had—if I had—this might never have happened."

Joanna saw Oswald was trying to keep back his sobs ; she went up to him and laid her hand on his arm.

"Don't give up hope," she said. "If God lets Charlie live, I know you will be kind to him ; and—" she hesitated, for the expression of her feelings was always difficult to her—"we can all pray for him, and that is the best thing."

Oswald sat upright at once. "Ah!" he said, "that is it; I can't ; I wish I could. I can't believe

enough to pray ; all that sort of thing seems outside me."

"Oh ! Oswald !"

"Yes, that's the truth ; and I expect, Joan, it's outside a great many people, only they don't like to say so."

"I wish you would talk to Mrs. Stuart about it," Joanna said, with a sigh. "She is real ; it is not an outside thing with her."

"Pray don't set her to preach to me," Oswald said ; "and, Joan, don't talk about me to any one ; I hate that. I have been nearly wild sometimes when they have all chattered about my health and my headaches ; and the scholarship—how my heart has been set on that ! It seemed everything to me a week ago ; and now—— But what is the use of talking any more about it ?"

Joan stood silently by Oswald for another minute, and then a little pleading voice was heard at the door :

"Joan, we are quite ready ; we may come down to tea, mayn't we ? Truda says we mustn't."

Joanna hastened to little Sibyl and Daisy, and quieted them by taking them to her room with her, till she was ready for tea."

The meal was scarcely over when Mrs. Stuart and Dr. Prendergast came in. Aunt Helen started up, and going to her brother, said :

"Is there any change, Arthur?"

"We have just had a consultation," was the reply, "and there is only one hope for his life. The leg must be amputated just above the knee."

Dr. Prendergast spoke in a low, hollow tone, and Aunt Helen's cry of distress was too much for him. He hastily left the room, and the door of his study was heard to shut as the father went to pour out the anguish of his heart undisturbed.

Mrs. Stuart proposed to take the children to the Vicarage; and they were only too pleased to go.

"You had better come with them, dear Gertrude; you can take care of them, and try to amuse them."

"Oh! no, no," Gertrude exclaimed; "I would far rather stay here. Don't take me away."

Cecil, who had now joined them, said in her calm, quiet way, "You had much better go, Gertrude; you cannot do anything here."

"So you are always telling me," Gertrude said passionately. "It is too hard when I feel as if my heart was breaking."

Mrs. Stuart put her arm round poor Gertrude, and drawing her close, said gently:

"My dear child, you would be useful if you came and took charge of your little sisters at the Vicarage, for I am here the greater part of the day."

Gertrude's tears broke out afresh, but she could not bring herself to the required sacrifice.

Presently Joanna said : " If you want me, Mrs. Stuart, I will come with the children."

But then Oswald spoke :

" Not you ; don't you go."

His white, rigid face struck Mrs. Stuart, and she said decidedly :

" No, I will not take Joanna from you ;" and the gentle hand was laid caressingly on Oswald's forehead. " I will take no one against their will."

Aunt Helen had gone to see her two darlings equipped for their visit, and Mrs. Stuart was left alone with the children.

" When is it to be ?" Oswald asked in a faltering voice.

" To-morrow morning, about ten o'clock."

" Does he know it ? Oh ! does he know it ?" poor Gertrude exclaimed.

" I think he guesses how it must be. But he is very ill, and the doctors think it is better not to speak more directly about it to-night."

" I don't see how any one can wish to live as Charlie will be then," Gertrude exclaimed passionately. " Oh ! it is too hard. He will be miserable ; he will be wretched ; and we shall all be wretched."

" Do not say that, Gertrude," Mrs. Stuart said ;

"perhaps you may all be happier than you have ever been before. If God spares Charlie's life, you will all try to do everything to make his heavy cross lighter; and that will be a joy in itself. To-night we will all," she said reverently, "pray to God for him, that he may feel Him to be a refuge in every time of trouble. When God is with us we cannot be quite cast down; and we know He, who bore all the bitterest pain of body ever borne, can feel with us as we suffer, and as we watch those who suffer. Anything—yes, everything—that brings us nearer to our Lord must be a blessing."

Mrs. Stuart saw the almost impatient shrug of Oswald's shoulders as he leaned back in his chair, his eyes closed, and the dark lashes lying on his cheek. She read his thoughts and understood him, and her sympathy for him was very great. It would be far more difficult for him to grasp the outstretched Hand which would save and help, than for the impetuous, ardent Gertrude.

As she bid him good-night she gently kissed his forehead, and then went to take the excited children to the Vicarage, one of the younger servants accompanying them.

That night and the next day were written for ever in the memories of the Prendergast family. It was the climax of all that had gone before, and how the

hours passed they never knew. The bells rang out on Christmas Eve clear and joyous, and the watchers in the old schoolroom could only sit and wait for tidings.

At last, as the grey dawn was breaking on Christmas Day, Gertrude started up from a troubled sleep to see their old nurse standing by her bed.

"What is it, Nurse?"

"They think there is hope," Nurse said, breaking down and crying. "They think he is better. I came to tell you, poor dear. Miss Cecil is gone to bed; she has been up all night, and I think she'll sleep now a bit. Your poor papa looks fit to drop; and if there is not a message come for him to go out to old Mrs. Watson's! Nothing ails her but fidgets; I wonder she isn't ashamed to think of herself—that I do!"

"How does Charlie look?" Gertrude asked.

"Oh! you mustn't ask me," said Nurse, rallying her energies. "If his life is spared, we won't think of looks. I'll go and get a cup of tea for you, for you are shivering and shaking."

"Bring Joan one too, Nurse; and do let Oswald know."

When Nurse was gone, Gertrude leaned over to see if Joanna was still asleep.

"Joan, are you awake? Did you hear there is

hope this morning—hope for his life? But, oh! I can't bear to think of what it will be for him."

Joanna turned and threw her arms round Gertrude, pressing her close with loving sympathy.

"Was that Nurse's voice?" she said. "I was not sure whether I was dreaming. Is he really better, Gertrude? Oh, I am so thankful!"

"There is hope: that is all they say;" and as she uttered the words, the Christmas bells rang out their melodious chime, telling of the great Hope which broke upon the world like the rising of the sun in dark places, eighteen hundred years ago.

And now day by day that gleam of hope strengthened. With the new year came times of comparative calm; and in a few weeks the family at the Priory settled into its usual routine.

Oswald returned to the College School: Miss Scales resumed her seat at the table in the school-room: M. Le Bras again presided at the French and German lessons twice a week: the sound of rapid feet was again heard on the stairs, and young voices rang out joyous and glad: while in one room Charlie lay, the ghost of his old self, looking upon the leafless branches of the trees on the Priory Road with sad pathetic eyes, refusing comfort.

All the energy of Charlie's young life seemed to have died out; he did not complain, nor was he

irritable and impatient. Perfectly passive, he lay day after day hopeless and quiet. He never referred to the accident, to Weston, or to Spiers ; the effort to speak seemed too great ; a dull and deepening gloom hung over him like a cloud.

As he grew stronger, Dr. Prendergast allowed his brothers and sisters to visit him by turns ; but to Gertrude these visits were only a pain and grief. "Shall I read to you, Charlie?" she would ask.

"No."

"Do you like me to talk?"

"I don't mind."

"Does it fidget you if I read to myself?"

"Oh no."

And this in a hopeless tone, implying—"Only leave me alone." Then Gertrude would be quiet for a few minutes, till thoughts of Charlie rushing about, foremost in every game, and full of happy vigorous boyhood, would rise before her ; and she would suddenly get up, take his thin white hand in hers, press it passionately, and bursting into tears would leave the room.

"We must be patient," Dr. Prendergast would say. "It is generally the case, after a limb has been lost, that great nervous depression follows, and it takes a long time for the circulation of the blood to resume its proper course. When one of the

members of the body is gone :—we must be patient.”

“How long have I been lying here?” Charlie asked suddenly one day, when Mrs. Stuart was sitting with him.

“Nearly three months, my dear,” was the answer. “Easter will soon be here now.”

“I shall lie here three years, I suppose, if I live ; but I hope I shall die before that.”

“Oh no ! Charlie ; you will soon be able to get up and move about.”

“Don’t,” Charlie said ; “I shall never move again.”

He spoke with more energy than he had done since the blow had fallen upon him, and Mrs. Stuart hailed it as a good sign.

“Charlie,” she said, “do you ever think of the many brave and good men who have suffered as you do, and yet have lived and have been useful and happy. The words may seem without meaning to you now, but one day I think you will understand that God’s love has not failed, even in this.”

“No, I shan’t, Mrs. Stuart ; I don’t intend ever to be seen by any one. Fancy being stared at as—as—a cripple with one leg !” Charlie gave an involuntary shudder. “There are many things,” he said, “I

should like to talk about, and yet I can't. It seems too much trouble," he added wearily.

"The power will come in time," Mrs. Stuart said cheerfully, "the power to express what you wish."

"You are very kind to me," he said earnestly. "I always think of mamma when you are with me. Isn't it odd how much I think of her when I lie here? Not think, either; I feel as if she knew all about me; and sometimes at night I can fancy I see her; you are next best."

Mrs. Stuart was inexpressibly touched; and bending over the boy, kissed him as his mother would have done.

This conversation was the beginning of a little move in the right direction.

The boy began to take some interest in outward things, and even to ask questions about the school. One day, when Oswald came to pay him his accustomed visit, which generally lasted a very few minutes, he said:

"How is the Third getting on now?"

"Oh! all right, I believe," was Oswald's answer.

Charlie's next question was evidently asked with great difficulty.

"Is Weston in his old place?"

"No; I am glad to say the school is rid of that fellow. He had to walk off about a month ago.

He was as good as expelled—and serve him right.”

Charlie made no reply, but continued his wistful gaze at the tree by his window.

“And you are going up for the Exhibition,” he said after a pause. “I am so glad ; you are safe to get it.”

“I wonder you care about it at all,” Oswald said in a husky voice. “It’s very good of you, Charlie.”

“Care! of course I care. I am glad there should be one of us to do something in the world. I have only been a plague to my father, and now I am a dead weight on his hands for the rest of my life!”

“Don’t say that,” said Oswald ; “I can’t bear to hear you talk like that.”

“It is true though. But, Oswald, I want you to do something for me, if you don’t mind—will you?”

“Of course I will, anything you ask me.”

“Well, I owe Gertrude sixteen shillings ; and I owe a little fellow in the Second, two ; and Jim Spiers something, for——” a shudder passed over Charlie, an involuntary shudder, as he spoke—“for that gun ; I hired it, you know, and I wish to pay the money myself, you see. Now, will you sell my bat ? It was new the end of last summer ; and my jersey is new too. Many of the fellows will be glad to buy them cheap. And then there is a knife with

a lot of blades ; it cost six shillings, and I think would fetch something. Will you try, Oswald, to make some money for me ?”

“ Yes, if you wish ; but I think you need not sell your things. Papa would——”

“ I know he would pay if I asked him—if he knew ; but I want to do it myself. Besides, I shall never want anything again ; the things will be no use to me.”

The boy turned his head ; and Oswald, unable to speak, left the room.

He fulfilled his brother's wishes, for he understood the desire that he felt to pay his debts with his own money.

As a matter of fact, Oswald disliked to bargain about the bat and jersey ; but he did it, and the three articles brought in twenty-two shillings. He put it in Charlie's hand a day or two after the conversation.

The boy's eyes brightened. “ Thanks,” he said ; “ I am so glad to get it. More than a pound too. Who has got the bat ?”

“ Percival minor,” Oswald said, naming a boy in the Third.

“ That's jolly ; he is a splendid player, and will be a good bat in time. And has he got the jersey ?”

“No ; Harper minor has got that, and the knife too. He was awfully glad to get them, I can tell you. All the fellows are always asking about you.”

Charlie did not speak for a minute ; then he said :

“Give Jones two-and-sixpence, and Spiers one-and-sixpence, and then it's all settled. It's like a weight off my mind. And thank you very much, Oswald ; you are so kind about it.”

It was always more than Oswald could bear, to hear Charlie say that. Ah ! if he had been kind to him sooner, helped with his work, stood by him at school, been his friend ! Now what could he do for him ? Nothing—comparatively nothing.

O brothers and sisters, living together in a home where health and energy and spirit and powers of mind and body are in full force, remember in time that no one can live to himself. Make friends of your own household. Help each other to run well in the race set before us all ; and learn before it is too late, that we are all accountable in our Father's sight for the welfare of those with whom He has bound us in the bundle of life by the many subtle links of a mysterious chain which can never be dissolved.

Gertrude was surprised to see Charlie's eager face

when she came in from a long walk the same evening. He almost looked like the Charlie of old.

"Here are heaps of primroses, Charlie dear, and violets. I am going to fill all your jars again ; will it worry you ?"

"No ; give me some. How nice they smell ! Where have you been ?"

"To Ashton. We got into the wood there, Joan's wood, and gathered such a quantity. We drove out and walked home—it is such a lovely day."

Gertrude stopped ; she was afraid of seeing the cloud rise on her brother's face, as it often did when she spoke of the out-of-door pleasures he could never know again. But he only said :

"I say, Gertrude, here is that money at last. Please pay Joanna, and yourself, that six shillings——"

"Oh ! no, no, Charlie ; I don't want it. I will take Joan's, but not the other. Please, pray don't make me."

"Nonsense, Truda ; times are changed indeed, if you are so rich that you don't want six shillings ; besides which, what should I do with it ? I have got eighteenpence left, and I don't want it. I wish you would change it into sixpences or threepenny bits, and then I can give it to Daisy and Sibyl for goodies when they come and see me."

Gertrude took up the money as she was desired,

slowly and reluctantly ; and Charlie watched her till she had disposed of it all in her pocket.

"Don't lose it," he said ; "hadn't you better pay Joanna at once ?"

"I think I had, or very likely the horrid old shillings will be conjured out of my pocket. Why, I declare they are dropping out now ; there's a big hole in my pocket, I do believe."

Gertrude was so delighted to hear Charlie laugh once more as she grovelled on the floor after shillings and sixpences, that she did not hear her father come into the room till he was close by the bed. Dr. Prendergast was as pleased as Gertrude to see Charlie's smile.

"What are you about, you careless child ? Whose money is that ?"

Gertrude kept her head down so that her father could not see her face. She gathered up the last stray shilling, and then left the room.

"Well, my boy," Dr. Prendergast began, "you look quite bright to-day with all these flowers ; and I have brought you these from Mrs. Watson, with her love."

"Poor old Watty !" Charlie said, taking a basket from his father's hand, filled with a variety of little things which the old lady thought might please him—a minute shape of guava jelly, some cocoa-

nut biscuits, and a little old-fashioned book full of pictures of the Thames Tunnel—that wonder of Mrs. Watson's early days.

"Father," Charlie began, "you saw Gertrude picking up money ; I should like to tell you about it, if you will sit down."

And then the ice being broken, the boy poured out a story of all his troubles and faults, ending up with :

"I think if I had the time back again I should be different, but I don't know ; anyhow, I hope you will forgive me. I was only a bother and trouble to you and every one."

"I think you will be a comfort to me now, Charlie," his father said, in a voice broken by emotion ; "and as I have told you, when once you begin to move a little, power will come, and inclination to do more will soon follow."

"I had rather lie here. I don't want to be seen."

"Well, I will not press you, my dear boy ; we must be patient."

"Father, I was never told till the other day that Weston had left the College School. Why was I not told ?"

"We thought it better to avoid mentioning his name. It's as well to forget him."

"But I don't forget him ; and I want to see him."

"I think he has left Minsterholme, or is to leave it very soon. Don't speak of him ; Mr. Birchall has a very bad opinion of him."

Charlie said no more then ; but the next time Mrs. Stuart was with him he asked her as a great favour to find out whether Weston was still in Minsterholme. "I have something to say to him," Charlie said earnestly. "I shall feel happier if I can see him. Do you know where he is going?"

"I believe he is to go out to a relation in Australia. His mother cannot hold him in any check, and his uncle has advised this step."

"Well, I hope he is not gone. I wish I had known about him before."

Mrs. Stuart lost no time in calling at Mrs. Weston's house, and was shown into the room where she and her daughters were at work.

Mrs. Stuart was by no means a favourite with the Westons. She had once before come to tell them of poor Annie Wood's dying condition, and had, with some difficulty, extracted from Mrs. Weston a small sum towards getting the poor girl some comforts in her last illness. When she entered the room Mrs. Weston received her coldly, and was very uncommunicative about her son. He was leaving Minsterholme with her in a day or two, and she hardly knew if he had time to call

upon young Prendergast. The meeting would be painful, and boys always shrank from the sight of illness. Archie was very sensitive, and the night the sad accident happened had been nearly distracted ; so she had been told.

Mrs. Stuart's gentle decision, however, was too much for Mrs. Weston.

"I feel sure," she said, "your son would not refuse the request of an old schoolfellow. Can I see him?"

"I don't think he is at home. Maude, my dear," addressing one of her daughters, "will you inquire?"

But the question was settled by the abrupt entrance of Weston himself.

When he caught sight of Mrs. Stuart he was retreating ; but she said :

"May I speak to you for a few minutes ? I have brought you a message from an old schoolfellow. Charlie Prendergast is very anxious to see you ; will you come to the Priory with me now ?"

"Archie was caught," one of his sisters said as he left the room with Mrs. Stuart. "I dare say she will preach to him all the way to Dr. Prendergast's house."

"I don't think she preaches," Maude Weston said ; "she is a very nice person, and is so kind to

people when she takes a fancy to them. All the time Hester Mason was ill she took her flowers nearly every day, and used to amuse her with heaps of books and things."

"Oh, I dare say she is all very well," Mrs. Weston said; "but she was rather impertinent about that servant who died, poor thing, of rapid consumption; and I don't know what business it was of hers to come and attack poor Archie."

"Mamma!" exclaimed Maude, "she did not attack him; and I think it is only natural that Charlie Prendergast should wish to bid him good-bye—they were so much together."

"Yes, indeed," Mrs. Weston said; "the poor boy led Archie into trouble, I am afraid. He was dreadfully rebellious to that stern father of his, and—"

"I don't think it is fair to speak of him in that way now," Maude said indignantly. "I am sure Archie has been trouble enough to us."

"You are always ready to go against your poor brother," Mrs. Weston said; "and he will very soon be gone from us for ever. It is so unfeeling of you."

Mrs. Weston, like many other injudicious mothers, could not allow her boy to be considered in the wrong by others, though at times she would not

spare him herself. And it is to be feared that she cared very much more for any public disgrace of which the outside world took heed than the ceaseless disregard of truth, sobriety, and honour, of which her son was guilty. It is often so ; we are too apt to look more at the consequences of sin than at the sin itself ; and our children are quick to mark this, and rule their lives accordingly. The home where God is not loved and feared, and His law more precious than thousands of gold and silver, may be superficially bright, and apparently prosperous, but cannot be really happy.

Mrs. Stuart walked silently by Archie Weston's side ; she felt for him more than he guessed. With the magnetic power of ever ready sympathy, she knew how he would feel when brought face to face with the boy whom he had known bright, vigorous, and full of health and spirits, now a pale, thin invalid, the ghost of his old self.

As they reached the Priory Weston said, "Does Prendergast look very ill now?"

"You must expect to see him very much altered," was the reply ; "but there has been a great improvement in him the last few weeks. We who see him daily can appreciate this more than you will."

Weston struggled hard to maintain a careless,

indifferent manner ; but when the door closed on him, and he found himself alone with Charlie, his assumed indifference gave way. He stood transfixed, gazing at the figure propped up with pillows, and listening to the voice which had lost the boyish ring, and had a strange, unwonted tone in it.

"Well, Weston," Charlie said, "I am glad you are come. Shake hands, won't you?"

Weston advanced to the bed with uncertain, hesitating steps, and his lips quivered so that he could hardly articulate the words, "How are you, Prendergast?"

"I am better. I say, Weston, I want to speak to you, as I hear you are going away. Sit down."

"I wonder you don't hate me ; I have done enough to make you."

"That's all over and gone," Charlie said. "No one will ever hear anything about that day's duck-shooting from me. I dare say I was very nasty and disagreeable, and provoked you, for I was not happy, you see. I knew I was in the wrong with my father, deceiving him, and doing everything I ought not to do."

"A deal of that was my fault," said Weston. "I am awfully sorry now, I am indeed."

"I know you are ; but what I want to say is, that since I have had to lie here, I have thought a great

deal about many things, and our school-life, and the fellows, and all we did."

"I have done with school now, you know," said Weston bitterly. "I was kicked out a month ago by old Birchall. Not but what there are several fellows left not a bit better than I am."

"Two blacks don't make a white," said Charlie; "but, Weston, you will take what I say in good part. I am laid fast with one leg, and shall most likely never be able to do anything again; but I do feel sure drinking a little too much beer or stuff at places like old Spiers', and making use of low boys, as we did of those sons of his, and cheating and swearing, and using bad language, must bring a fellow into trouble sooner or later. I can't say what I wish very well, but I do want you, Weston, to try to give up these ways, and think of me lying here when you are at the other side of the world. I see it all now, how weak and unmanly I was; and I think God has heard my prayer, and that He has forgiven me. Weston," Charlie went on, laying his hand on the head which had sunk upon the bed by him; "I say, Weston, you don't mind my speaking like this."

All that was softer and better in Weston's nature was touched; the tears trickled through his fingers, and his shoulders heaved with his sobs.

"Promise you will try to fight hard against all wicked things—promise, Weston."

Weston could not speak; he was brought face to face with that mysterious change often wrought by pain, and which passes over the young and gay and careless, and leaves them older, sadder, graver; effecting in a few short weeks what years would fail to bring about.

Weston put out his hand and grasped Charlie's, holding his hand fast. Then he muttered:

"Forgive me, will you?"

"That has been done long ago. Good-bye, Weston! good-bye; don't forget me."

And so these two parted. The elder boy's heart filled with a sense of shame and grief which overwhelmed him; the younger with the sweet sense of injuries forgiven, and peace which all future trial would not wholly take away. And yet, as Weston's rapid steps were heard going downstairs, poor Charlie sighed—nay, almost groaned, "What wouldn't I give to run like that!" he said to himself. "Never, never; oh! is it *never*? How shall I bear it?"

But Charlie did bear it, and nobly too.

CHAPTER X.

THREE YEARS LATER.

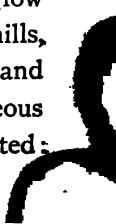
THE heat of the July day had given place to the cool of evening, and a soft breeze blowing off the Channel brought with it refreshment, as it swayed the flag on the pier at Clevedon, and moved the waters of the Channel into a gentle ripple.

The sky had been veiled in clouds all the afternoon, but now the west was brightening, and there were signs that the sun would go down behind the purple, dark-browed hills with glory.

Joanna Coningham and Oswald Prendergast were seated at the farthest end of the pier, as far out at sea as it was possible to get. The band was playing on the Green Beach, a strip of turf which lies above a low range of irregular and fantastic rocks, affording charming seats for those who like retired corners for reading or thinking. Not on band nights, however ; then the quieter folk re-

sorted to Lady's Bay, or even Walton. But the oppressive heat had made the most active lazy; and perhaps Joan and Oswald could never be counted amongst these. Anyhow, this evening found them disinclined for exertion, for Oswald was lying full length on one of the benches with a book; Joanna leaning over the parapet, and looking out upon the dun-coloured, sombre sea, with her dark, wistful eyes.

More than three years have passed since we left the Prendergasts in their home at Minsterholme; and Joanna is nearly nineteen, Oswald a year older. Joanna's figure is now tall and undulating, her complexion brown but healthy, and the sensitive mobile mouth has a sweet and pleasant expression. Her dark hair is gathered back from a straight low forehead, and coiled round her small head. She wears a simple brown holland dress, relieved with bright scarlet bands, a ribbon of the same colour tied under her white collar, and a poppy at the side of her black hat contrasted well with the raven hair against which it nestled. As Joanna watched the scene before her, her eyes began to glisten and glow with light. For the sun, as he neared the hills, threw the clouds from him on either side, and presently there was revealed one of those gorgeous sunsets for which the English Channel is celebrated:



sunsets which have brought artists to reside at Clevedon and other places of the same character, and have defied all powers of description in words or representation on canvas.

"Oswald," Joanna said presently, "sit up and look, this is going to be something wonderful."

And indeed it was. As Oswald dragged himself, in his old lazy fashion, into a sitting posture, he was almost dazzled with the glory before him.

A pillar of fire stretched across the water, around which millions of sparkles danced and played. Beyond these all the fairest and most lovely colours were painted. Rose, toned down into tenderest pink ; daffodil yellow, fading into delicate primrose ; streaks of opal of every hue ; bands of emerald, and clearest beryl. Slowly the great sun neared the hills, all wearing their purple robes : then he crowned them with gold, and sank behind them with the majesty of departing glory.

"There ! it is gone !" Joan said. "Yes, that is something to remember. And look at the water ; it is still inconceivably beautiful."

Then, after a minute's pause, Oswald said, "What are you thinking about, Joan ?"

"I was thinking how these dull, sad-coloured waters are transfigured ! So like the smile of God's love !" she went on to herself, not aloud : "How

He can brighten and change the dullest and most earthly heart. It is not what we are—it is what He is." Then she said, after a pause, "I hope the others have seen it ; they are out in a boat somewhere. Ah ! here they come ;" and looking down, a cheery hollo sounded from a boat just below them ; the voice was Charlie's.

"We have been waving at you two for the last half-hour."

"Did you see the sunset?"

"I should think we did," said Gertrude. "Wasn't it splendid!"

"We are coming directly," Charlie said, "to wake you two people up ; and——" But the rest of the sentence was lost, for the strong, vigorous stroke of the oars guided the boat past the piles of the pier, and the voices passed out of hearing.

"How well Charlie rows," Joanna said ; "and indeed he does everything well."

"Yes, you may well say that," said Oswald ; "he is the plucky one of the family."

"You are the successful one," Joanna rejoined ; "the scholar and double first."

"Nonsense ! all that goes for nothing. Since I got the University Exhibition, three years ago last Spring, I have done nothing I have been proud of."

"Oh, Oswald!"

"Well, heaps of fellows, crammed like stuffed turkeys, take honours; then they collapse, and nothing more is heard of them. That will be my case."

"To be heard of is not everything," Joan said. "Besides, you will be heard of. It is a great thing for you to have the prospect of so many pupils at Oxford; every one says so."

Oswald had subsided into his full-length position again, and only gave an impatient "Nonsense!" Presently he said:

"I don't think you know what ambition means, Joanna."

"Yes, I do. I don't think we can aim too high in one way. I should like to do many things which seem to me ambitious."

"Teach poor children, build houses for old women, get places for decayed governesses, and broil yourself in soup kitchens! What will Ashton be in two years' time, when you come into your inheritance, as Aunt Helen calls it?"

"Two years! oh, more than two years, isn't it?" Joanna said.

"Not much more. The Festival of St. Michael and All Angels will see you nineteen, my lady."

And now there was the sound of approaching

footsteps on the long even boards of the pier, and the tap of a crutch, rapid and decided.

"Joanna! Aunt Helen and Cecil are coming with the Cuthberts. They have just arrived for a month—is it not a shame? All our fun will be over now! Oh; we had such a nice row; it wasn't hot out at sea. And we were nearly run down by a yacht, only Charlie's splendid rowing saved us!"

"And Gertrude's vague steering nearly did for us."

"Are you in earnest or joke?" Joanna asked, making room for Gertrude by her, while Charlie leaned over the parapet by Oswald.

"Sober earnest. I was in such fright because we had the children with us; and little Daisy was really scared."

"That is why they were so subdued just now, when the boat passed beneath us. Poor little things—are they gone home?"

"Yes; nurse met them and carried them off. I think Daisy was rather sea-sick, as well as frightened."

"The idea of being sea-sick on water like this," said Charlie. "Well, we have had a narrow escape. Here comes the yacht; they are lowering a boat, and two or three men are getting into it. Look, Truda!"

Gertrude took the glass from her brother's hand, and said, "Yes ; I see. I feel sure I have seen that tall man before."

"Or some one very like him," Oswald suggested.

And now Aunt Helen was heard approaching ; her voice just as eager as ever as she discussed with Mrs. Cuthbert the advantages and disadvantages of Clevedon. Then there were greetings and inquiries, and plans made for excursions ; and the Cuthberts were evidently in their most gracious and demonstrative mood. People who live in the same town, on very moderate terms of friendship, generally find the temperature of their liking for each other considerably raised when they meet at the sea-side.

The group at the end of the pier was now very numerous, and merry laughter and voices sounded on all sides.

Gertrude had separated herself from the others, and was standing at one corner alone, watching with interest the little boat which had been lowered from the yacht and was now making for the pier. As it neared the steps, she became conscious that the young men in the boat were looking at her ; and a glance of half recognition gave her a feeling of certainty that somewhere or other she and the tall man, as she had called him, had met before.

Time had not changed Gertrude so much as Joanna. The golden hair still showed a decided objection to be confined in any stiff form ; and Gertrude's dress was a good deal less carefully arranged than her sister's or Joanna's. The bow of blue ribbon under her collar was very much awry, and the pretty white straw hat looked as if it had seen some service. But the blue eyes were as frank and clear as ever, and the rosy lips were curved with perpetual smiles, and when parted showed a row of white teeth ; while a bright complexion heightened the beauty of a face few could resist looking at a second time.

"Nothing will ever alter Gertrude," Cecil said sometimes : and yet Gertrude was altered. Mrs. Stuart acknowledged it with pleasure, and knew that Gertrude was not now drifting about as in her earlier days, like a ship without helm or compass. The long discipline which she had undergone at the time of her brother's accident had been useful to her. Her patience and gentleness towards him in the trying days and weeks and months of his return to daily life, seldom failed. For it was only by slow degrees that Charlie had become the vigorous, active, manly youth he now looked as he joined Gertrude, and said :

"Did you ever hear such a babel in your life ?"

There had been an intermediate stage of despondency and painful effort and disappointment, when Charlie's life had seemed a burden to himself and to others. Victories such as he had gained are not won in a day ; and it was by Gertrude's help that he had found it at last comparatively easy to face the world lame for life and cut off from all the pleasures he had held so dear. It was on his account chiefly that Dr. Prendergast sent his whole family to the sea-side for two months in the summer. Boating was a great resource for Charlie, and the exercise of rowing, in which he excelled, was very good for him.

As the brother and sister were turning away together, the young men from the boat came up the flight of steps leading from the lower part of the pier. The younger of the two, as he faced Gertrude, made an involuntary pause : then taking off his straw hat, said :

"I think we have met before, Miss Prendergast?"

Gertrude's face flushed, and her embarrassment and hesitation made her look very pretty, reminding Claude Coningham of the day he had seen her perched on the top of a steep bank, with the cluster of blackberries in her hand, years before.

"I dare say you have forgotten me," he said ;

"although it would be impossible for me to forget you. I can't hope that you remember me."

"I have seen you before," Gertrude said frankly; "but I don't know where or when. It must be a long time ago!"

"In the blackberry season; now can you remember?"

"Oh yes!" Gertrude said, the colour on her cheeks deepening. "Charlie, this is Mr. Coninghame, Joanna's cousin!"

Joanna, hearing her name, turned, and Claude went up to her, shaking her hand warmly.

"My friend, Mr. Macintosh," he said, introducing his companion. "We are on a little cruise in his yacht, refreshing ourselves after a Liverpool session of hard work."

Mr. Macintosh, a square-browed, phlegmatic Scotchman, smiled:

"I don't think either you or I will die of hard work, Coninghame."

Meanwhile Claude was looking at Joanna.

"I knew Miss Prendergast instantly; but I should not have known you, you are so changed—not to say grown."

"Three years is a long time," Joanna said. "Every one may be supposed to alter in three years!"

"Not all of us so much for the better," Claude said, almost involuntarily; and from that moment Oswald registered a dislike to Claude Coningham in his heart.

And now there was a flutter amongst the group of young ladies; yes, and amongst the old ones also. Aunt Helen and Mrs. Cuthbert were both interested in the new arrivals; and Carrie and her sisters were at once infected with that foolish manner some girls assume at the introduction of strangers of the opposite sex.

Mr. Macintosh found himself suddenly an object of much attention, and Carrie captured him for herself, talking a string of foolish nothings with an affected little giggle, which was always infinitely provoking to Gertrude.

Cecil was so much like her old self, as we knew her in the Priory schoolroom, that it is hardly necessary to describe her. She was pretty and complete, practical and useful; perhaps still a little wanting in the charity which hopeth all things, and scarcely drawing towards Gertrude as an elder sister might. Nevertheless, Cecil was a very important member of the family; and her precision was useful as a contrast to Aunt Helen's vague habit of mind.

"And are you going to stay at Clevedon, Mr.

"Coninghame?" Miss Prendergast asked. "We shall be so glad to see you and your friend, Mr. Mackenzie, to-morrow to dinner—luncheon, I ought to call it for you, but we dine early always. I wonder if Mr. Mackenzie is related to Sir Ronald Mackenzie?"

"Macintosh is my friend's name," Claude said, with a smile. "He has kindly brought me for a cruise in his yacht. We had no intention of staying at Clevedon; but now we have found so many attractions, we shall find it difficult to sail again, I expect."

It required some skill to get away from Aunt Helen; but when they reached the pier gates, Claude joined Gertrude and Charlie.

"We ought to apologise for the *Fenella's* conduct in coming so near your boat just now. If the rowing had been as uncertain as the steering, we should have had to take a mud bath to rescue you."

"When big boats come bearing down on little ones," Gertrude said, "the best steering in the world is no good."

"Gertrude is touchy on this point," Charlie said; "you must beware!"

"I knew you, even in that critical moment," Claude said, turning to Gertrude; "but I don't

think I saw you at the Priory, the night I paid my respects there, three or four years ago," he continued, addressing Charlie.

"Charlie was most likely at school," Gertrude said.

Charlie now dropped behind, and Gertrude and Claude Coningham were left together.

"What a fine fellow your brother is—such a splendid chest ; we were watching his rowing before we came up with you !"

Gertrude's eyes glistened with pleasure as she answered :

"Oh yes ! we are all so proud of Charlie ; you cannot imagine what he has had to bear, nor how nobly he has borne it."

"How did it happen ?" Claude asked.

"It was a gun accident," Gertrude said, her bright, cheerful tones suddenly subdued and sad ; "but he does his best to make us forget it. We go to the sea-side every summer, because he likes the boating ; last year we were at Weymouth. This is our house," Gertrude said. "We have nice large rooms, and a very good view from the windows. The Cuthberts are come to lodge next door to us. They are Minsterhome people, who have just arrived. It is too lovely an evening to go in yet ; shall we go on to the Green Beach ? the band has nearly finished playing."

"So you don't like the band?"

"No; it gives the idea of dressing up, and strutting up and down like peacocks on a terrace, a sort of thing Charlie and I hate."

"And my cousin Joanna, does she hate it?"

"I should think so. Joan and Oswald always prefer solitude and books. We call them Dr. and Mrs. Dryasdust; but the doctor is much the drier of the two."

Claude laughed, and found himself walking up and down the Green Beach in the dim, fading light, and quite forgetting that he had left his friend amongst strangers.

There was no want of conversation, and Claude began to contemplate the possibility of spending a few days at Clevedon and the neighbourhood, if Mr. Macintosh were of the same mind.

"Is there much to see in these parts?" he asked.

"Beautiful country," Gertrude replied. "There is Cadbury Camp, where we are all going to-morrow, which is delightful."

"An old Roman encampment, I suppose."

"Yes. And then there is the old church amongst the hills; you must see that, for Arthur Hallam is buried there."

"Ah! I remember. 'The Danube to the Severn gave.' Well, I think Macintosh and I must lionise

the place a little. It is time we turned into our berths on board the *Fenella* now."

"Do you sleep there?—how nice it must be! Oh! I wish you would take Charlie a little cruise some day."

"I am sure Macintosh will be very glad to do so; and perhaps you and your sister and my cousin will come also?"

"If Aunt Helen will let us, it will be delightful! I never was on board a yacht—I mean a yacht which belonged to anybody in particular."

"Well, the *Fenella* will suit you then; she does belong very particularly to my friend—she is in fact a wife to him."

"I thought it was a wonderfully pretty boat when you came bearing down on us—indeed, it was my admiration of the *Fenella* which distracted my attention from my business with the rudder. Here comes Cecil, and Carrie Cuthbert, and your friend."

"Aunt Helen thinks you had better come in now, Gertrude; and she hopes you will come too, Mr. Coninghame. We are going to have some tea."

The whole party now turned into Hallam House, and the spacious room and long table, lighted by the chandelier, looked very attractive. The meal was one of those picnic ones which seem a part of sea-side life. A lobster of course showed its red

back against the white service, and a substantial meat-pie was supported by a variety of rolls of all shapes and sizes.

Claude Coningham was full of conversation, and made himself very agreeable, Aunt Helen thought; and she wondered at Joan's distant manner when he spoke to her. Certainly she ignored all idea of relationship, and left him to Gertrude and Cecil; while Carrie Cuthbert, who was glad to escape from the scene of unpacking in the next house, devoted herself to Mr. Macintosh.

"We are going to Cadbury to-morrow," Miss Prendergast said, when at last the two gentlemen rose to say good-night; "won't you join us? We shall be so glad."

Claude looked at Mr. Macintosh.

"I shall be most happy to do so, if you are so inclined, Macintosh."

Mr. Macintosh thought it would be very pleasant; and so it was settled.

"Joanna," said Gertrude, as the two girls stood together on the balcony, "what made you so grumpy to Mr. Coningham?"

"I don't think I was grumpy; but you know, Gertrude, your father told me long ago I was not to have any communication with my cousins. It was a distinct request of grandmamma's."

"Oh! that was years ago: it must be different now; you were a child then, and now you are a woman."

"I don't see that that alters the case. Right must always be right, whether we are young or old."

"Or middle-aged," Gertrude said. "Well, I am looking forward to a sail in the yacht very much, and so is Charlie; are you not, Charlie?"

Charlie, who had joined the two girls, said:

"Yes; we shall be able to go to the Steep Holms in first-rate style. I like Coninghame very well. The other fellow is dull and slow, and wants a good shaking."

"Well, I hope it will be fine to-morrow," Gertrude continued. "You are to have the old grey pony from Stuckey's, Charlie, and we are to have the largest pony-carriage. It will carry all the baskets, and Aunt Helen and the children; we shall walk."

"You can't walk all the way; at least Joan can't," Charlie said. "You will have to get two of those elegant conveyances, and you forget there are the Cuthberts to think of."

"Ah! so I did. But they are always ready to use other people's goods without paying for it. We shall see plenty of them here, because we shall be useful; and then we have an added attraction in

the two gentlemen who have dropped from the skies."

"Do you know Carrie is still in the room Truda?"

"The Cuthberts will take a carriage for themselves," Cecil said, as she came as far on the balcony as the crowd would permit; "so you are wrong as usual, Gertrude. And do you know you left your shawl in the boat, with your silver brooch in it? Do you ever go anywhere without losing something? That old sailor Bacon who brought back the shawl told nurse he always did look for some 'propputy' when the young lady had been out with him. He was sure to find a book or 'a something' under one of the seats."

"Good old Bacon!" exclaimed Gertrude; "he is the most honest old fellow that ever lived."

"I wish he would keep a better boat; that is the worst feature of this place," Charlie said—"and the muddy water."

"But remember the sunsets, Charlie," Gertrude said; "there never was such a sunset as that we saw to-night."

"You will write some verses about it, Truda, and we shall see them in the *Clevedon Directory*."

"I dare say. I love little Clevedon, though that sombre Scotsman did tell me just now that his sister

said he would find two articles of food at Clevedon and Weston, at all hours always ready: peas-pudding when the tide was out, and pea-soup when the tide was in!"

"How horrible!" exclaimed Cecil. "I hope Mr. Macintosh does not think that clever. Who is he? I can't quite make out."

"He is the eldest son of the head of the merchant's house in Liverpool where Mr. Coningham is."

"Is Mr. Coningham in a merchant's office?" Carrie Cuthbert said in astonishment. She had been sitting with Aunt Helen in the drawing-room. "I thought Mr. Coningham was Lord Beauclerc's son——"

Gertrude gave Joanna a significant pressure of her arm as she replied aloud:

"I am sorry to dispel the illusion, my dear Carrie; but Claude Coningham is no less Lord Beauclerc's son because he works in an office. He told me his father was poor, and that he much preferred doing something to help himself than to live on at Culvers in majestic poverty."

"You seem very much in his confidence already," Carrie Cuthbert said sharply. "I think it is a great mistake for a man of his position to associate with his inferiors."

"How do you know they are his inferiors?"

Gertrude persisted. "If Mr. Macintosh is one, you seemed to consider him rather superior, I thought."

"Gertrude!" Cecil said in the old reproving tone; while Aunt Helen began a long story of the relations of various dukes and earls who had taken up commerce.

"How every one shirks the word trade," Charlie said *sotto voce*.

There was now a general movement in the room, and Carrie Cuthbert wrapped her shawl about her, and Oswald walked into the next house with her. He had been reading under the chandelier, and had taken no part in the general conversation. As he returned he saw one figure still standing in the balcony, and even in the dim outline knew it was Joanna. The sitting-room was on the ground-floor, a little raised from the strip of garden below, but two or three steps led from the entrance up to it.

"Are you star-gazing, Joan?" Oswald said, going up to her and leaning over the balcony by her side.

"No; there are no stars to be seen. This dull, muggy weather will last, I am afraid, in spite of that sunset. When is your father coming, Oswald?"

"On Saturday, I suppose."

"I wonder if Claude Coningham and Mr. Macintosh mean to stay here."

"I am sure we don't want them," Oswald answered ; "nor these Cuthberts either."

"It won't make much difference to you, because you will soon have to join your reading party."

"Are you so anxious to get rid of me, Joanna?"

There was something in Oswald's voice which made Joanna turn her head towards him.

"As if I could be," she answered simply ; "but I think, perhaps, I ought to write to Dr. Prendergast, if they stay more than a day ; because you know, Oswald, he so distinctly told me that grand-mamma did not wish me to have any intercourse with my father's relations."

"Oh, well," said Oswald, with an effort, "I don't see that you can help it if these men take it into their heads to put the yacht in here. It is a free country."

"Yes, of course." She always rested so entirely on Oswald. Ever since the day he had helped her to learn "The Happy Warrior," and had befriended her, she had leaned on him. A very strong tie subsisted between them : on her side it was simply the affection of a sister for a brother ; but Oswald had of late been obliged to see that his love for her was different to that he felt for his sisters.

A sense of ownership in Joanna made him resent the idea of any one claiming a right in her. I don't think he had looked forward, or saw the

barrier that existed between them. Sometimes he found himself wishing Joanna were a poor as well as friendless girl, who had found a home in his father's house ; and he tried to forget that she was the heiress of Ashton, and would when she came of age take the position which rank and wealth always must give.

Presently Joanna said, after a silence : " You think I need not write to Dr. Prendergast and tell him that my cousin is here ? "

" Your cousin ! " Oswald repeated.

" Don't you like him ? " Joanna went on. " I think he is very good-looking, and is it not brave of him to work as he has done in a merchant's office, at Liverpool ? "

" It seems to have answered very well, " Oswald rejoined. " Yachting at other people's expense must be pleasant enough. "

Joanna gave a little sigh. " Oswald has moods sometimes, " she thought. " I dare say he is tired, and vexed about something ; he will tell me to-morrow. "

And so Joanna bid him good-night, and went to the room she shared with Gertrude. The old Bible, her mother's Bible, was still her constant companion, more rather than less valued as time went on. She always liked to think the faint

pencil-marks, made by the hand so long cold in death, came as a message to her in her need. To-night, while Gertrude was calmly sleeping, Joanna sat with the Book open before her. Her eye had been arrested by the words, underlined as I have described :

“When my spirit is in heaviness, Thou knowest my path.”

In earthly friends, do we not feel that no real sympathy can be given us, unless our circumstances are known and our troubles in all their bearings looked at by kindly eyes? Something of this in the certainty of her Lord's knowledge of the path which lay before her, filled Joanna's soul with peace, though an undefined longing lay in a secret corner of her heart, which, if it could have found words, would have been :

“I wish I were really Gertrude's sister, and Dr. Prendergast's daughter ; and I wish I had not to go and live at Ashton Court, and come into my ‘inheritance,’ as Aunt Helen says. ‘In a short time, too,’ Oswald said, ‘I shall have to live at Ashton ;’ but it is still two years, and I hope I shall be more fit for it then than I am now. I must try to be fit, and God will help me.”

The excursion to Cadbury Camp the next day was an undoubted success. Youth and health and

spirits were there in no scanty measure, and the whole party was ready to be pleased with everything. The sky had cleared, and the atmosphere was less oppressive even in Clevedon itself ; but on Cadbury Camp a fresh breeze was blowing, felt to be exhilarating after the motionless condition of wind and water which had been so depressing for a week past.

Claude Coningham's perceptions were not so dim but that he saw Joanna avoided him, and did not give him any chance of speaking to her apart from the others. This piqued him, and thus rather quickened his desire to see more of her.

While he was laughing and talking with Gertrude, and saying many pretty nothings to Carry Cuthbert, he was thinking of Joanna, and trying to make up his mind about her.

The three years he had spent at Liverpool had not brought him into contact with many women, young or old, to whom the epithet "gentle" could fairly be applied.

As in all large towns, there were ladies in gorgeous silks and fashionable toilettes of every shade and hue, who rejoiced in all that money could bring ; but he felt the difference between them and his cousin, and it was nothing but a sense of right which kept him firmly to the appointed routine in Mr. Macintosh's office.

He preferred it, however, to the home where, with unfailing regularity, he presented himself every other Saturday, sometimes oftener. The aspect of things had not improved much at Culvers ; but an undercurrent was at work, of which the wretched invalid, who was more and more given over to himself and his low selfish aims, did not dream. Claude had for the last two years been a junior partner in the great firm where he had begun as a novice ; and these years had been most successful ones. Little by little Claude was determined to pay off his father's debts ; and although it did look like removing a mountain by grains at a time, still he did not flinch from the effort. His friends the Brandons encouraged him to persevere, and to Mrs. Brandon he owed all the good that the gentle influence of a sweet, and sympathising woman ever brings. Now it certainly was provoking to find that Joanna was perfectly indifferent as to his presence or absence, and he contrasted her coldness with Gertrude's warm-hearted interest, and resented it with all the injured dignity of his young manhood.

The party returned late from their excursion to Cadbury. The next day Mr. Macintosh's promised trip in the *Fenella* came off ; the next, another excursion was planned ; but, to the relief of one or two of the little community, a drizzling rain fell, and

compelled the most enterprising to give up their intentions. The Cuthberts and Miss Prendergast were amongst those people who believe in perpetual motion as the spring of enjoyment for a month or two at least of the year, by the sea-side. The excess of picnics, and rides on rough horses, and drives in springless vehicles, and a series of walks, as if every one were endowed for the time with the fabulous cork leg, may, perhaps, be the cause of the dejected and jaded appearance sometimes presented by these over-energetic people on their return to their home life. They have "done" everything within the locality where they have planted themselves for a holiday; and not unfrequently they have done for themselves also, by an unnatural strain upon their powers which those who admire their prowess and are unable to emulate it, call their "marvellous energy."

Wet days at the sea-side are never very cheerful, and it was with a sigh of relief that the Cuthberts and Prendergasts saw signs of a clearance about five o'clock, and set out for a walk to the Old Church amongst the hills. Oswald Prendergast had established himself in his own room with some tough reading, and was so engrossed with it that he did not hear the merry voices in the hall below, till his little sister Sibyl came tapping at his door, saying,

"It does not rain a bit now, Oswald, and we are all going to the Old Church ; and you are to come too !"

The child delivered her message, but waited for no reply ; and Oswald, but dimly conscious of what she had said, read on.

CHAPTER XI.

PERPLEXITIES.

A GLEAM of sunlight from the west, slanting across the page, illuminated the Greek characters over which Oswald was poring. He pushed away the book, dipped his hot forehead in a basin of cold water, and then, running his fingers through his thick, dark hair, he took his straw hat, and went downstairs.

The sitting-rooms were empty. Aunt Helen had gone into the next house to chat with Mrs. Cuthbert, and the rest of the party were, as Oswald knew, taking advantage of the clearance to walk to the Old Church.

He was setting forth, in his leisurely fashion, to meet them, when he met Mr. Macintosh.

"It is a great nuisance," he said, "that the tide goes out so far here. When one lives in this channel on a yacht, one's home is so far off. Have

you seen Coningham? He came ashore before I did. Where is he?"

"I am sure I don't know," was the reply, in a tone which implied, "and I am sure I don't care."

"He is somewhere about with your people," Mr. Macintosh said; "there are great attractions here for him. The heiress is a very graceful girl, and has a fine face; it is a joke that Coningham always told us she was awkward and ugly. She is not very gracious, however, to her nearest of kin."

"And pray, why should she be gracious?" Oswald asked sharply.

"Oh, I don't know. Claude is a fine fellow, and if he goes on as he has begun, he is in a fair way to come into the title without the load of debt which the present peer has been so clever in accumulating. And her father, you know, had also a talent that way."

"No, I didn't know it," said Oswald shortly, as if he did not wish to invite further discussion.

Mr. Macintosh was never very easily silenced, though his sentences were always well considered and slowly enunciated, and flowed on in an even stream which was scarcely less difficult to stop than Miss Prendergast's eager and rapid utterances. He lighted a cigar as he strolled by Oswald's side past the Green Beach, through a meadow walled in

towards the sea, but open to a wide expanse of country on the other side.

The Old Church at Clevedon lies hidden by two grassy slopes, which rise on either side and shut it off from the sea, which breaks at their foot with a measured cadence at high water.

This range of grassy slopes rises somewhat abruptly seaward, and at the edge they are broken by irregular masses of limestone which push up through the smooth turf, and afford pleasant resting places at a considerable height above the water.

As Oswald and Mr. Macintosh came up to the church, they met the large party coming out. Oswald's eye at once saw that Joanna was not among them ; and looking towards the farthest slope he discovered two figures standing out against the sky, which he knew to be Claude Coningham and Joan.

Mr. Macintosh was received very cordially by the Cuthberts, and they declared that he must come into the church, and see Arthur Hallam's grave and the tablet, with the inscription written by the poet, whose friendship, chilled by the hand of death in all its early prime, has borne fruit in the poem now familiar in every English home.

"Oswald, do come too," little Sibyl said, putting her small hand into her brother's. But Oswald turned away moodily, and before any one had

guessed his intentions, he was walking towards Clevedon again.

"What is the matter with Oswald?" Gertrude said, as she and Charlie sat on a stone in the little churchyard, while the others went into the church.

Gertrude's eye followed the direction of Charlie's crutch, which pointed towards the hill where the two figures still stood.

Gertrude's face flushed, and she said quickly, "What do you mean?"

"That!" said Charlie laconically.

After a pause, Gertrude began :

"I think Joanna has been absolutely rude to Mr. Coningham since he came here. It is so absurd."

"Not at all ; my father's orders were explicit."

"Every one must be the better for knowing him," Gertrude said, with sudden enthusiasm. "He is a relation to be proud of ; Mrs. Stuart would say so, I know."

"He is no relation of yours," Charlie rejoined. "He is all very well, and I like him ; but I wish the *Fenella* had not put in here, all the same."

"Well," said Gertrude, "I think it is so heroic of him to go into an office. People with handles to their names are not generally so self-forgetting."

Charlie turned suddenly, and faced his sister.

"I think, if you must have it, that it is harder for

me, with one leg, to go into an office than for Coninghame, with a handle to his name."

"You are not going into the Bank, Charlie?"

"Yes, I am; and my father quite approves of it. I must do something."

"But you do a great deal; you carve beautifully and draw."

"I shall never make any money by either drawing or carving. Come, old Truda, that is not like you to clap and cheer a stranger, and pour cold water on your lame brother's noble aims!"

"Oh, Charlie!" Gertrude said, "you know I don't; you know exactly what I feel; only you must have plenty of air, and how can you get it shut up in a Bank at Minsterholme?"

"The hours are not over-long, and the business by no means oppressive."

"Does Mrs. Stuart know?"

"Of course she does; she first put it into my head; whatever is there that is worth anything she put it there. Come, Gertrude, let us be off and pursue our homeward way free of encumbrances. Those two people are moving now, and we shall have the whole crew upon us."

Charlie walked very swiftly and well with his crutch, and, as Gertrude had truly said, never reminded any one of his infirmity. The handsome

lame boy and his pretty sister were often noticed at Clevedon ; and the keen interest to which the desultory life of the sea-side gives added force about one's neighbours and their concerns, was excited in many watching eyes about the family of the Prendergasts.

Two maiden ladies, who spent their time in knitting and crochet, on a bench sheltered by a hedge of bent and crooked hawthorn bushes on the Green Beach, looked up as Gertrude and her brother passed.

Enveloped in waterproofs, they defied the damp and rain, and kept their little twinkling eyes open for all comers.

"How very pretty that girl is, and how attentive to her lame brother," was the remark of one of the ladies.

"Yes ; but how much she has been with the young man with the fair hair and moustache this week !"

"Here come some more of them ; that is a very good-looking man with the red beard talking to the tall, pretty sister. I can't make him out quite."

"Oh ! he is the owner of a yacht ; the Earl of Something's son."

"No, Mattie, that is the other."

"I am sure you are wrong, Jane ; but it is of no consequence whatever."

The two good ladies relapsed into silence, and knitted and crocheted still more vehemently. Presently the elder spoke :

"Look, Mattie, here come the dark girl and the young man with fair hair."

"Dear me, how pale she looks, and how slowly they are walking ; something must be the matter !"

Other eyes were also upon the pair ; and Oswald Prendergast, who was hidden by the bushes from the observation of the old ladies, was watching Joanna with a fixed earnest gaze.


"I wish you would take my arm," Claude was saying. "I believe after all you are hurt, and won't say so."

"I am not really hurt," was the reply in low sweet tones ; "it was nothing of a fall. Gertrude would laugh at the idea."

"You came back with some force, I can tell you. I never saw such a device for getting over a wall as that ; those horrid bits of stones just stick out to be in the way, that's all. But, Joan, I am sorry if I have vexed you, and I am sorry that our relationship is so distasteful to you."

The young man spoke with a tone of injured pride, and added bitterly, "It is hard that the sins of the fathers should be cast up against the children."

"It is not that : you know it is not ; but Dr.



Prendergast has been so very good to me, I ought to do what he wishes. He is coming here to-morrow," she added.

"Oh! indeed; I am glad of it. I want to see him. He will snub me, no doubt; but I can bear it, I dare say, if I try."

An evil spirit seemed to be in Claude this evening. He was prouder than he thought; and like many of us, he had but little suspicion of the strength of the foe he had to fight against.

Was it possible, he said to himself, that Joanna thought he wished to marry her as a matter of business, for the sake of Ashton Court, for the sake of the accumulated thousands which would so conveniently, as his father said, help the Beauclercs to hold up their heads again? Then as he walked along by the side of the tall graceful figure, he felt irritated with Joanna and with himself.

Into her simple steadfast heart, no such thoughts as he supposed had entered. It was as she said: Dr. Prendergast's order bound her, as much and more than if she had been one of his own daughters. Not in the very least degree would she be disloyal to his wishes, and the idea of grieving him was a weight upon her.

The most unflinching Christian principle was at the root of all Joanna did, and the faith which she

held with a firm hand was the secret of the mingled sweetness and strength of her character. "She is too old for her age," some of her young companions would say ; and then the lonely years of her early childhood were referred to as the cause of this. The sensitive, nervous temperament which lay hid under the quiet exterior was kept in check and subdued, though sometimes the needful effort was more than any one would have guessed.

No more was seen of Joanna that evening. Gertrude found her lying in her bed with a white face ; and in answer to her questions, she said she was tired and had fallen off a wall, and had shaken herself, she thought. Gertrude was scarcely satisfied, and saw there was something behind ; but she brought her some tea, covered her with a shawl, and showed all those little nameless attentions which express sympathy without words. As she was leaving the room after her second visit, Joanna called her back.

"Sit down a minute, Truda, I want to tell you something."

Gertrude's heart beat fast, and the remembrance of Charlie's crutch pointing towards the two figures standing together on the crest of the green hill recurred to her.

"You saw me walking with Claude Coninghame

this afternoon. I could not help it ; he asked me to come, and said he could not understand why I would not speak to him. Then he told me about all his great troubles ; his father's wretched state, his home, so sad and desolate. He told me, he thought as I was nearly the only relation he had in the world, I might be civil to him."

"So I think," said Gertrude shortly.

"Well, to-morrow your father will be here, and I shall tell him, and ask his advice. You know, not once or twice, but many times, when your father has been talking to me, he has told me of grandmamma's will, and of her wishes, and I think Claude might respect them more."

"Now, Joanna, that is very unreasonable indeed. I think you are too straight-laced sometimes ; I mean, I think you look at duty and right till you get morbid and stupid. It is no fault of yours that the *Fenella* put in here. I should just take it naturally, if I were you ; it is a pity to do anything marked because——"

"What, Truda ? do go on."

"Well, because it may look as if you were afraid of your cousin."

"Afraid of him !"

"Joan, you are the most unsuspecting mortal. Don't you see he *may* think *you* think he wants to

marry you for the sake of Ashton Court, and the money?"

"Marry me!" Joanna exclaimed; then in a low, sad voice, "Oh! I see what you mean."

Joan turned her head away, and Gertrude, leaning over her, kissed her, and said cheerfully:

"I dare say it will all be right. Cheer up, Joan; don't make your moan, as I used to sing to you in my teasing days. You have had a fall, it seems, like Humpty Dumpty, and Dr. Dryasdust is angry about it, and thinks all the king's horses should be sent for, post haste, to set you up again. But seriously, are you hurt?"

"No, only I feel all shaken up, and battered. It was so ridiculous of me to fall like that, when you and I have been over the wall often—the one which divides the two hills."

"Yes, I know. Poor Aunt Helen stuck fast there, and had to be hauled down by Cecil's and my united efforts."

"I toppled back in the most ridiculous way," Joan said; "but Claude broke the force of the fall by catching me."

"What an interesting event," Gertrude exclaimed, laughing. "That will come in splendidly in the rhyming 'Clevedon Chronicle.' It is getting quite a bulky affair. Six sheets of lined foolscap; and

never was the name of the paper whereon it is written more appropriate to what is set down there. I will go and add a few lines now."

"Truda, is Oswald come home?"

"Yes, of course ; but his company is not very desirable this evening. To use an ancient proverb, 'he is as cross as two sticks.'"

"I promised to write out some verses for him to-night. I think I must try to get up."

"You shall do no such thing. It does the worthy Dryasdust no harm to be without your services sometimes. Now good-bye, and when I come to bed I shall bring you a glass of hot wine and water ; and if you promise to drink it, I won't let Aunt Helen come near you."

Joanna made no answer, and Gertrude departed.

Dr. Prendergast was greeted at the station the next day by a crowd of his children, all delighted to see him, and full of eager inquiries as to how long he could stay. The tide was out when the party reached Hallam House, and it was not a moment in which to see Clevedon to advantage.

"And where is Charlie?" Dr. Prendergast asked, looking round ; "and Joanna, I miss her."

"Charlie is gone to Weston with Mr. Coningham in the *Fenella*. They can't be back till nearly eleven o'clock, because of the tide. We have been

out in the *Fenella* once, papa," Sibyl said ; and Daisy added :

"I dare say Mr. Coninghame will take you, papa, if you like. The yacht is not his, it is Mr. Macintosh's," she continued. " And do you know Mr. Macintosh gave me the most splendid doll, papa, the other day."

Dr. Prendergast looked about him in a bewildered way. Mr. Coninghame, the yacht, Mr. Macintosh. What could it all mean ?

Then Aunt Helen began an explanation, which lasted while Dr. Prendergast had his tea, and left him still in much confusion of mind.

One thing, however, was clear—that Claude Coninghame had come for the second time into his way, and that he must for the second time remind him of the conditions under which he had accepted the guardianship of Joanna, or rather had it thrust upon him. Dr. Prendergast was not the man to shrink from a disagreeable duty ; and while he paced the Green Beach, and listened to his little girls' rapid chatter and eager account of all there was to be seen and done at Clevedon, he made up his mind that he would let Claude Coninghame know that until Joanna was of age, he must hold to the instructions he had received from Lady Beauclerc.

The family went to bed early at the sea-side, and Dr. Prendergast was standing alone by the open

window of the sitting-room, when the door gently opened, and Joanna came in. There were times when he was tempted to wish he had never accepted the trust committed to him, and refused it at any cost : but it was only at times that he wished it. Joanna had become dear to him ; her confidence in him was so strong, and her desire to please him so great. Now as she came slowly and languidly towards him, he held out his hand, and kissing her, said :

“Well, my dear, I am sorry to hear you have been in your room all day. You have not hurt your back by your fall, I hope ?”

“No,” she said ; “I was a little shaken at first, but I was not hurt. I came downstairs now because I wanted to speak to you alone.”

“Sit down then, my child, and let us hear what it is.”

“You have heard, I dare say, that my cousin Claude Coningham, is here—has been here since Monday.”

“Yes !”

“And I wished to tell you that I remembered what you told me, and your orders.”

“Not my orders, my dear, your grandmother's orders,” Dr. Prendergast interposed ; “I only act as her representative.”

"I know," Joanna said, and her voice trembled ; "it has been a great burden for you to bear all these years. You know how grateful I am."

"You have been a great comfort and pleasure to us all, Joan. I am sorry if Mr. Coningham's visit should have disturbed and vexed you."

"Why," said Joanna simply, "he is vexed with me for remembering what you said. I did not wish to talk much to him, and he seemed to think it so unkind, and Gertrude says it was ridiculous ; but I did it for the best."

"My dear, you always act for the best ; you are wholly to be trusted. Now do not look so sad and serious about it ; no great harm is done ; indeed, no harm at all, that I know of. The two gentlemen seem to have made themselves very popular and agreeable, and I dare say they will sail off in the *Fenella* on Monday, and we shall hear no more about them. I have brought you many kind messages from Mrs. Stuart. She says she misses your help very much in her school, and shall be glad when you go back to Minsterholme ; she means to come and pay you a little visit next week."

"Oh ! that will be delightful !" Joanna exclaimed, with more energy than she had shown before ; and then relapsing almost immediately into her quiet and almost dejected manner, she said, "I hope I

shall never do anything to grieve you, you have been so good to me ; good-night !”

“ Good night, my dear child, and may God bless you.”

The little hand which rested in the Doctor's was cold and trembling ; as Joanna left the room, he said to himself, “ A very sensitive and nervous temperament, unfitted to bear up against any of the great troubles of life ;” and then he lighted his cigar, and walked towards the Pier, where an excursion steamer was expected with the in-coming tide, and the lights were still shining out clear and bright in the darkness. By the pier-gate he met Charlie and Claude Coninghame, and Mr. Macintosh.

“ Hallo ! there's my father !” Charlie exclaimed eagerly. “ We have had a splendid cruise to-day, out past Minehead ; this is Mr. Macintosh, father, and Claude Coninghame.”

Dr. Prendergast shook hands with both the young men, and then Claude said :

“ We are come ashore for Sunday, and mean to sleep at the Hotel to-night.”

“ I hope you will take a run with us on Monday,” Mr. Macintosh interposed ; “ it will give me great pleasure if you will.”

“ Thanks !” Dr. Prendergast replied ; “ but I must be off by an early train on Monday morning.”

"Ah! you poor doctors never get a holiday," said Claude. "This is our way, Macintosh, so we will say good-night."

Good-nights were exchanged, and then the father and son walked back together.

"Well, Charlie," his father began, "I hope things have prospered here; have you all enjoyed the place?"

"Well," said Charlie, till the *Fenella* put in, the boating was a sell; but she has made all the difference."

"Ah! I dare say; I hope no mischief has been done. It is odd that Claude Coninghame should alight thus on the very spot where Joanna was to be found."

"Yes; it was pure accident, of course," Charlie answered. "Coninghame is a fine fellow, and has, I should say, as keen a sense of honour as any man could have."

"I don't wish to doubt it," Dr. Prendergast said. Presently he added, "Joanna is not looking well."

"No, it is the old story with poor Joan; what other people can get over in a day she feels for a month."

"But what has she had to get over here?"

"A wall, for one thing," said Charlie, laughing; "and she has bothered herself about Coninghame

coming. I think it is absurd, rather. How could she help it? And I think——”

But what more Charlie thought did not transpire then. After a pause, he began to speak of his determined resolution to enter the Bank at Minsterholme, as soon as the vacancy occurred; and when he and his father parted for the night, and Dr. Prendergast heard the tap of his crutch as he went upstairs to his room, he could only be thankful for a son who was so nobly determined to do his best in the battle of life, and by God's help live out of himself and his own infirmity, and set himself to work as a duty not to be set aside.

Sunday dawned fair and calm; the clouds did not return after the rain, and the hills surrounding Clevedon seemed to be rejoicing on every side.

Joanna did not feel strong enough to walk to church, and took her Greek Testament, which under Oswald's teaching, she could read with tolerable satisfaction, and her hymn-book and prayer-book to a quiet nook amongst the low, grey rocks, where she could recline as in an arm-chair. It was a corner known only to herself and to Oswald, and at high tide the little rippling waves almost washed her feet as she sat there.

A sweet Sunday calm came over Joanna that morning, and her soul rose to communion with

God ; which seems best described by those blessed words : "Thy peace shall flow as a river." If God were her strength, she need not fear for the future ; the future which sometimes seemed to weigh her down with a sense of responsibility.

The tide rose higher and higher, unperceived by Joanna ; and the murmur of the waves, which were quickened by a fresh breeze from the channel, lulled her at last into a half dreamy repose.

She had been in this position for nearly an hour, when the scraping of feet on the ledges of rock above her made her turn her head. It was Oswald coming towards her with a book in his hand.

"You had better move," he exclaimed. "You will get wet. Wait till I can reach your hand."

Joan rose to her feet ; but the ledge which formed the foot-stool to her arm-chair was covered with sea-weed, and was now very slippery and wet.

"Joanna !" Oswald exclaimed ; "wait one moment." For he saw she staggered, and her figure swayed backwards.

Oswald knew that below the first narrow ledge the rock made a sudden and abrupt dip of some six or seven feet.

Joanna struggled to retain her footing ; but just as Oswald's hand grasped hers, she fell on one knee ; and it was all he could do, in his own uncer-

tain position, to retain his own foothold. For a moment it seemed probable that both would be sucked back by the insidious force of the next retreating wave.

With a desperate effort, Oswald was master of the situation ; and succeeded in pulling Joanna up to a wide ledge of rock out of reach of the water. Then he sank down by her side ; and she was frightened at his pale, almost livid face.

"Oh ! Oswald," she said, "I am so sorry I frightened you. I forgot all about the tide. Is it very deep down there?"

"Seven or eight feet, at least," he said ; "and you would have had no chance against the strength of the waves. I"—he shuddered, and then said, "What should I have done if I had seen you go, and not been able to save you?"

"Let us thank God then," Joanna said solemnly ; "I never thought of danger ; I had been so happy, reading and thinking. How beautiful the fifteenth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel is in the Greek ! How patient and kind you have been to teach me as you have, Oswald !"

He did not reply ; and she saw his face expressed unusual emotion.

"Have you been to church?" she asked, after a pause.

"Yes, alone, not with the others. I am going away to-morrow, Joan."

"Oh! I thought it was Tuesday. I am so sorry."

"Joan," Oswald said, sitting upright, and speaking no more in a faint and undecided tone, but with manly firmness, "I have found out something about you the last two or three days."

"About me!" she said, turning towards him a face where astonishment was written. "About me, Oswald!"

"Yes, Joan, about you. So," Oswald continued, "it is better for me to go. I don't know when I shall come back—perhaps never. I hardly know whether I am right to say this; but I think it is best to be honest always. You see, Joan, I have loved you for years; ever since that day you sat with the old 'Wordsworth' open before you. We have been very happy together, Joan."

"Yes," she said; but her voice faltered now, and her dark eyes glistened with emotion as they fell under the earnest gaze of his.

"And it will have to come to an end now. I love you better than anything in all the world; you have helped me on, and kept me right. And yet, Joan, I must bid you good-bye now. I can't be like a brother to you; for what I feel for you is that love which can only be known once in a life-time: not

always even once," he added ; " I believe some people live and die without ever knowing what I mean. Now, Joan, you understand me ; and you won't think, as I fancy you have thought the last few days, that I was behaving like a brute to you. It is awfully hard," he went on, " that the moment I know I love you, as no one else will ever love you, I should feel I must give you up."

Great tears had gathered in Joan's eyes ; and in spite of every effort to restrain them, fell upon her hands, which lay crossed on her lap.

Oswald took them gently and reverently in his, kissing the tears away.

Three little words escaped her lips, as he repeated : " It *is* hard that I must give you up !"

" Why must you ?"

Only those little words : but they told the secret of her young heart—a secret suddenly brought to light ; a secret which had been hidden and unsuspected, but which could never be laid to rest again.

" Why ? Oh ! my darling, how can I even dream of asking the heiress of Ashton Court to be my wife ? How could I endure that it should be said that I wanted, what many *will* want, your wealth and position ? How I have longed and wished that we could change places ! If only I had something worthy to lay at your feet ! I dread even to hear

what my father will say, for I shall confide in him ; tell him all. I have heard that a classical master is wanted in a college that has been founded in Melbourne. I shall apply at once, and go out, if I can get it ; I dare say I shall get it. I do pretty well with coaching ; and this first-class, which I coveted so, and now don't care a straw about, will help me. There, darling, my tale is told ; I think it will be easier for me to do what must be done now, hard as it is."

Joanna made a great effort, and trying to speak calmly, she said :

"I am so sorry, Oswald : and yet," she added, while a ray of light shone through her tears, and a sad smile hovered round her mouth, "and yet I think I am proud and glad that you should love me. It seems so wonderful !"

He knew her far too well to think there was any pretence of humility in this which was not genuine ; and it was out of the sincerity of her tender heart that she added :

"I do not know what I shall do without you."

It was sweet to hear this from her lips, and it was almost too much for his self-command. But he only replied :

"I shall, as I have said, tell my father. I know beforehand what he will say, but no one but him

need know ; and Joan, I may rise to a worldly position when I need not be ashamed to ask you to be my wife ; if that day should ever come, I shall do my best to win you if—”

“ If what ? ”

“ If you are still to be won, but of course the odds are against me there ; still I would not ask you to feel bound to me for the world, Joan. I would not be such a sneak ; and you will keep what I have said from every one. Oh ! it would drive me mad to have it talked over,” Oswald exclaimed, with his old intolerance at the idea of being discussed.

“ I shall tell no one but your father, Oswald ; and perhaps Gertrude ; for I tell Truda everything.”

“ My father of course, though he will be awfully angry with me.”

“ Oh, no ; why should he ? ”

“ He will. I can hear beforehand every word he will say. But I think Truda had better not know ; for it will do no good.”

“ I think it would do me good,” poor Joan said.

Then they sat on for a few minutes, almost forgetting everything but the great love which in one had thus found expression with sudden vehemence, and in the other had woke to life with that strange sweet thrill, felt only when first the conviction of

being the one love of a true manly heart comes home to a gentle womanly girl.

"We must go home, now," Oswald said at last, rousing himself. "You won't forget me, Joan ; it is desperately hard to leave you, but it will be best."

"We must do what is right," Joanna said. "You know I am your father's ward, and must obey him ; and grandmamma's will was so very strict about my—I mean—" She blushed and hesitated, then went on : "I think all things do work right if we have faith and trust in God, and tell Him everything—you know what I mean."

Yes, he knew what she meant. He saw that the mainspring of her life brought it into beautiful harmony of word and deed. But Oswald, with all his high attainments and deep thought, had not got hold for himself of that golden thread, which is as a clue to lead us through the tangled mazes and intricate paths of this troublesome world.

Dr. Prendergast's Sunday at Clevedon was by no means a day of rest from anxiety and care. First, he had a conversation with Claude Coningham, which was not very pleasant on either side.

Claude said a good deal about the folly of being ruled entirely by the letter of an eccentric old woman's will, and implied that he and his friend should stay at Clevedon as long as it suited them.

Claude's life, as we know, was not influenced and blessed, as many a young man's has been, by the atmosphere of a happy home. He had been brave and honourable in his exertion, but he had not subdued his will to another and a higher will. He often chafed like a spirited horse against the collar, and his rank and position as heir to an old title and a place like Culvers sometimes rose up as a mocking phantom, and he would gladly have changed places with the son of any hard-working, honest merchant in Liverpool. He felt the same sense of Dr. Prendergast's integrity now as he had done three years before; but he had resented Joanna's manner to him, and felt altogether cross with her, and the world, and himself.

So when Dr. Prendergast said at last that he hoped they understood each other, Claude replied proudly, that it would be difficult for any one to mistake Dr. Prendergast's meaning; but he must be allowed to judge for himself.

"Not that I think you need see any cause for uneasiness," he continued; "my cousin is by no means inclined to friendly relations with me. Poor child! she has learnt her lesson too well."

This was very irritating; and Dr. Prendergast felt too much annoyed to say more than "Good evening," as he turned to take a solitary walk

beyond Walton Castle, where he hoped to escape the throng of Sunday pedestrians, who dispersed over the green hills on every side after evening service was over.

Dr. Prendergast told himself, as he walked along, that it was a monstrous thing to expect him to take the responsibility of a girl in Joanna's position. If he had had a wife to share it with him, it would have been different ; but he was absolutely unable to consult any one. Aunt Helen would, he knew, lean to the suitability of a connection between Joanna and her cousin, and had done nothing but praise Claude Coningham since her brother had arrived at Clevedon.

Cecil, calm and wise as she was, could scarcely be consulted in a matter like this ; and, indeed Dr. Prendergast felt that silence was golden, and that much talk and discussion would only do harm. Mrs. Stuart was the only confidant he felt inclined to trust ; and, then, as Dr. Prendergast rehearsed the circumstances of the case, as he should put them before Mrs. Stuart, if he consulted her, he almost laughed aloud, as he thought that, after all, there was no very distinct charge against Claude Coningham, who decidedly expressed nothing like a wish to make any overtures to Joanna, beyond those which cousinship and friendship warranted.

By degrees Dr. Prendergast rolled the perplexity from him, and began to give himself up to the enjoyment of the calm evening, sweet with the scent of a belt of firs that skirted the hillside where he now found himself, as he retraced his steps towards Clevedon. Just as he was debating whether the path through the fir-wood would lead him in the right direction, he was attracted by the figure of a man, stretched out by one of the high boulders of limestone which cropped up here and there along the crest of the hills. He went towards the figure intending to ask the nearest way back to Clevedon, when, as he drew closer, the man raised himself, into a sitting posture, and Dr. Prendergast saw it was Oswald.

"Hallo! how odd I should have come upon you," he said. "You still love retirement and books better than society and talk, it seems; but I hope you won't object to walk back with me now. Do you know if that path will lead us right?"

Oswald was on his feet now; but without answering the question which was put to him, he said, abruptly:

"I am glad I met you, father. I wanted to tell you about a change in my plans."

Confidences, or explanations, were always distasteful to Oswald; but his voice gathered strength

as he went on, and the dignity of his young manhood seemed to assert itself as he spoke of his love. His father heard him to the end, almost without a word, except indeed an occasional exclamation of surprise and perplexity.

"And you have told Joanna all this, Oswald—absolutely told her."

"Yes, I have."

"You were very wrong then : and you know it."

"I hardly think I was. She has belonged to me for all these years, and I could not abruptly leave her without a word. You have no idea, I daresay, what we have—I mean, what she has been to me : the spring of my work ; the wholesome, healthy element in my life ; her sympathy in all I do, ever ready. But I don't want to talk about it. I think I had better apply for this post at Melbourne. It is a large salary, and I shall do very well if I get it. I could not stay within reach of Joan, and never see her ; and I could not see her any more, as I have done. Oh ! if it were not for that wretched money of hers, how different it would be. I should have something to work and to live for then."

The father and son walked on together in silence for some time. At last Dr. Prendergast said :

"Yes, Oswald, I think you had better go away—quite away—it is quite impossible for you to pursue

this matter now. Imagine what it would be for me to have it said, that I had allowed one of my own sons to gain Joanna's affections, while I have, as her guardian, taken good care no one should approach her, in accordance with Lady Beauclerc's instructions. Poor child! poor dear child! the danger never entered my head. You have been all like brothers and sisters together, especially since poor Charlie's accident. I daresay I have been dense and stupid; your mother would have seen it. Ah! Oswald, her loss does not grow less heavy with time! Now, I charge you on your honour to keep this matter from every one. It will be hard enough to part from you, and to see you pulled up short in the bright career you have opened for yourself at Oxford; but, unless you can trust yourself, it must be done."

"I could not trust myself, father; if I saw, as I must see, others coming into the field, and trying to win her, then I could not bear it. I shall tell no one; you need not think it."

"No, I am not afraid; you shall not repent trusting your father thus, my boy. These things pass away; many a boyish love strong as yours has been overcome, when there was nothing left but to overcome it with a brave heart."

And as he said the words, the conviction forced

itself on Dr. Prendergast that Oswald's was not a nature to change its fixed purpose. He had proved this in the face of many difficulties already, battling against ill-health for some years of his early boyhood, and never relaxing his efforts till he had taken the academical honours he desired. He had proved steadfast many times, and Dr. Prendergast could not doubt that he would be steadfast in this instance too. He returned to Minsterholme the next day anything but refreshed by that holiday, and terribly perplexed and harassed about his family affairs. His patients remarked that he looked worn and anxious; and even Mrs. Watson, who had sent an urgent message for him to come to her as soon as possible on his return, felt a pang of self-reproach when he arrived at six o'clock in the evening, looking as her maid said:

"More fit to be in bed himself than going about the country after other folks' little finger-aches."

When Dr. Prendergast had disposed of Mrs. Watson, and ordered the same draught for that night as he had ordered a hundred times before—an innocent compound of camphor and water—and assured the dear old lady, with his accustomed patience and forbearance, that he did not see any cause for her alarm that she would be suffocated in

the night, he threw himself into his carriage, and said at last the welcome word, "Home."

Home was desolate and quiet enough, and the doctor sat for a long time in his study, musing over the events of the last two days. He had had no opportunity of speaking to Joanna before he left Clevedon, and he dreaded to do so. What would he not have given for a wise and tender friend in whom to confide? How blind he had been! how careless! He wondered if any one in his household had seen signs of what had come upon him so unexpectedly. Oswald was the last of his family on whom the suspicion of falling in love would have fastened. He had looked upon him as living in his books and for his work, and all the time there had sprung up what he could only regard as a hopeless attachment.

"I wonder what his mother would say. Perhaps that I ought never to have undertaken this responsibility; and yet how loving and lovable the child herself is, and what a pleasure it has been to me to see her developing into the graceful, winning woman, from the ungainly, reserved girl I brought here from Ashton three years ago! I must write to Mr. Field about Coninghame; he has designs also, I feel sure. At twenty-one Joanna must be left to follow her own wishes, but till she is of age I must and will hold strictly to the terms of the will."

Dr. Prendergast was roused from his meditations by the opening of his study door, and the announcement of Mrs. Stuart. She came in with her sweet smile, and with the assured manner of one who knows she is a welcome guest.

Mrs. Stuart still wore her widow's dress of plain black, and her figure was familiar in Minsterholme, where she was known by the poor as "the good lady."

"I was passing your house," she said, "on the way home, and could not resist coming to inquire what accounts you bring from Clevedon."

"They are all well, and most anxious to see you," Dr. Prendergast said. "When will you go?"

"On Wednesday, I hope. I had a very nice letter from dear Charlie. He is quite ready to begin work in the Bank when there is an opening; and how much his handwriting is improved. He says he writes a copy every morning, and makes long rows of figures. What a hero the boy is!" she added warmly.

"You always turn to the bright side of the picture," Dr. Prendergast said. "Yes! that poor boy is a great comfort; and how little I ever thought it would be so!"

"All your children must be a pleasure to you," Mrs. Stuart said. "I am sure Gertrude has enough sunshine in her to brighten any household. And then there is Joan."

"Ah! Joan," said the poor doctor, with a sigh. "You have listened in your kindness to many of my anxieties; now I am going to tax your patience again. I believe Oswald would be certain to wish you to be made an exception to his desire that the reason of his going to Melbourne should be kept secret."

"Oswald! to Melbourne!" exclaimed Mrs. Stuart in surprise. "What does it mean?"

Then Dr. Prendergast told his tale to sympathising ears. Mrs. Stuart's womanly appreciation of his difficulties, and intelligent grasp of all his honourable scruples, was just what he wanted. She agreed that the boy's own proposal did him credit, and that no obstacle should be thrown in the way; but she strongly advised that no very great opposition should be shown, if indeed the love on both sides was undoubted.


"Have you ever suspected it?" Dr. Prendergast asked. "Has it ever struck you that this might be the result of that child's introduction into my household?"

"I confess," Mrs. Stuart answered, with a smile, "such a possibility has presented itself; but I don't think," she went on, "it is ever well to go over what might have been, and to suppose that when we have been acting from a sense of duty we ought

to have seen and prevented what may have arisen independently of any wish of ours. We must always remember that an unseen Hand guides all the events of our lives, and that if we take up any manifest duty God will bless us in it. Perhaps this check may result in good to Oswald which we cannot see now."

A great deal more followed; and when Mrs. Stuart was gone, Dr. Prendergast felt relieved and hopeful. He was thankful that his children had such a friend, who interested herself in all their concerns, and to whom they were all so much attached.

Mrs. Stuart's work at Minsterholme might not, in the eyes of the world, seem half as important as that which she and her husband had carried on in the mission station far away. But it was not the less real, and it was of a value which it is hard to estimate aright. A sympathy which was ever ready, an earnest endeavour to benefit all with whom she was brought in contact, a gentle, winning manner which few could resist, and a loyal allegiance to the Master she served with the service of love, all combined to bring about what only a loving Christian woman can effect—a wide-spread, if silent and unobtrusive, influence for good in her day and generation.



CHAPTER XII.

CROSS PURPOSES.

CONTRARY to all expectation, and contrary, perhaps, to the wishes of every one, including Oswald himself, he obtained the appointment he sought; and as the leaves fell from the trees, he sailed for his new post in the Melbourne College. His testimonials from tutors and heads of colleges were so brilliant, that his father read them with a sigh, which the pride he felt in his boy could not repress. Oswald kept up bravely; to the last, he was strengthened in his determination by the conviction that he was acting for the best, and he never faltered.

The night after his departure, Dr. Prendergast heard a gentle tap at his study door, and he knew it was Joanna. She held a letter in her hand, and went quietly up to Dr. Prendergast's chair, saying :

"This is Oswald's farewell to me, I ought to show it to you."

"My dear, good child!" he said, "this is a hard

and difficult matter for me to deal with ; but you make it less difficult by your conduct. You know, Joanna, how I love you as a child of my own."

"Yes," she said, faltering a little, "and now he is gone I do not wish to speak any more about him. I cannot forget him, because it is not like a common loss—not like the separation of two people who have only known each other for a few weeks. He has been everything to me for years ; so kind, so good ; he has taught me everything, helped me, and been so patient with me, and of course I could never care for any one else."

"But you must see, my dear, that it was impossible for me to consent to any engagement. Mr. Field was quite as decided as I am : there was no alternative. Oswald saw this, and that made him ready to go away."

"Ah ! how you must wish that I had never come here." Joan sighed. "If indeed it was necessary for Oswald to go, I am a poor exchange for him. Will you read this letter ?"

"No, no, my dear ! I can fully trust you, and my boy too."

"I think you had better read it ; for you will see then, that though I have given up the idea of belonging to him now, still I do not give up my love for him."

Then Dr. Prendergast read the letter ; and gave it back to Joanna without any comment.

"Gertrude knows the real state of the case," he said at last.

"Yes, I was obliged to tell her ; and Mrs. Stuart knows ; but no one else—not Cecil, nor Miss Prendergast, nor Charlie."

"That is right. Now, my child, we must do our best to make the remaining time with us happy. Is there anything you would like ? You have only to tell me."

"Yes," Joanna said, "I meant to ask you if I might have a little low pony-carriage, which will hold me and Gertrude, or Cecil and Charlie. I should like so much to drive them about. My riding-horse seems lonely and selfish, I will give that up if you think best."

"I don't know that it will be necessary. I will look out for the carriage at once, and a pair of little ponies. I think a patient of mine has a pair he will be glad to sell. So that point is settled."

Joanna smiled, saying, "Thanks, you are always so kind. I shall like to go to Ashton sometimes to see the poor people, and help them if I can. They will belong to me some day, I suppose ; though I hope when I am twenty-one, you won't send me away from you."

"We will decide about that when the time comes, my dear. Mr. Field and I must do what is right—must try to do what is right."

"It was very strange," Joanna said, "that grand-mamma should dislike the Beauclercs as she did. I am sure if she had ever seen Claude, she would have liked him."

This was said in a perfectly simple way, and Dr. Prendergast smiled.

"I expect, my dear, the present Lord Beauclerc would never have won your grandmother's favour, nor that of any right-thinking person!"

"It is the more wonderful Claude is so good and nice," Joanna said; "he has had a very unhappy home; he told me enough to make me very sorry for him. It is very brave of him to work as he does in an office."

"He seems to have found a friend in you," said Dr. Prendergast. "Now, good-night, my child!"

That evening's conversation closed the discussion about Claude Coningham and Oswald. Joanna and Gertrude were, as they had ever been, close friends; but Gertrude had become suddenly uncommunicative on the subject of the *Fenella*, and those days at Clevedon, about which the Cuthberts delighted to speak, and even Cecil found it pleasant to talk over.

The grave Mr. Macintosh had evidently made an impression on Carrie Cuthbert, and this was perhaps the reason why she was now so warm in her profession of friendship to the Prendergasts.

Meanwhile Charlie had taken his place in the Bank, and showed that his resolutions meant something. With indomitable will, he forced his straggling, irregular handwriting into clerkly form, and sat with treatises on Banking, Bills, and Discount, open before him of an evening; breaking off sometimes to enjoy a joke with Gertrude, and allow himself to be drawn into a game of chess with the sober Cecil, or a round game of question and answer in verse with the children. But Gertrude's playful sallies were not as of old, she was fitful and uncertain, sometimes in wild spirits, sometimes silent and almost depressed.

"You take all things easy," she said one day to Joanna, as they were driving through the lanes; "you go on just the same with Oswald at the other side of the world; you are a wonderful person, Joan!"

"Why should I be different, Truda? It would not bring him back, nor alter your father's will; but if you think I don't miss him, and want him, it is indeed a mistake. It is all I can do to bear the thought of Easter coming so soon, and to know he

is not coming home as usual, and all because of me."

Joan so seldom spoke to Gertrude of Oswald, that she was almost startled with the earnestness of her voice, sinking down at last into broken words, as the tears gathered in her dark eyes.

"It is too bad to tease you, Joan, I am very disagreeable sometimes. But things don't go very smoothly with me. Aunt Helen is so provoking about that stupid Mr. Freeling. Is it not enough to make any one angry?"

"It is tiresome," Joanna said; "but really, Gertrude, I can't think he is so dreadful as you make out!"

"A horrid, stupid boy! tied to his mother's apron-strings! a muff! a——"

"Hush, Gertrude! remember the back seat; and I believe this is the Freeling's carriage!"

Joanna drew Bell and Ball to the side of the road, and a handsome open carriage passed them, driven by a fair young man with a clear, almost feminine complexion. A lady sat by his side, with a pleasant though rather anxious face, and as her son stopped the carriage, she raised herself to greet Joanna and Gertrude.

"I am so glad we met you, Miss Coningham. I was going to write and ask if you and the Miss

Prendergasts would drive over to luncheon on Thursday ; we shall have two or three friends with us, and Freddie is hoping it may be warm enough for lawn-tennis. Will you come ?

"Thank you very much," Joanna said ; "we shall be very happy to accept your invitation ; shall we not, Gertrude ?"

But Gertrude looked anything but delighted, and said something about an engagement with Mrs. Stuart.

"Freddie is so anxious you should come," Mrs. Freeling urged ; "we shall expect you at one o'clock, shall we not, Freddie ?"

All this time Mr. Freeling had been shyly glancing towards the pony-carriage, and absently touching his spirited bays with the end of his whip, so that the groom, who had gone to their head, could scarcely hold them. Indeed, the horses became so intolerant of delay under the circumstances, that "Freddie's" rejoinder was lost, as with a spring the servant swung himself up behind, and the carriage was soon out of sight.

"What good little things Bell and Ball are," Joanna said, as they resumed their quick, even pace. "Those fidgeting horses were enough to make any ponies restless. I wonder old Mrs. Freeling is not afraid to drive behind them."

"Oh! Freddie may do anything," said Gertrude. "I shan't go on Thursday!"

"Oh! yes you will, Gertrude; you won't have the heart to leave me to such a dull visit without you."


"You will have Cecil," said Gertrude. "Besides, it is the heiress who is wanted, not me."

"By Mrs. Freeling you mean, perhaps. Her Freddie would tell a very different tale."

The Freelings had only lately come into the neighbourhood of Minsterholme, and had taken a place which had been to let for some time.

There was a rumour in Minsterholme that the late Mr. Freeling had made his money in trade, and that the son had still an interest in the "concern," whatever it was, in some distant county. However that might be, or wherever the money came from, it seemed plentiful.

The Grange renewed its youth, and was soon made modern and fashionable by the help of upholsterers and work-people from London. Mrs. Freeling had very soon learnt the story of Ashton Court, its young heiress, her peculiar circumstances, and residence in the doctor's family. She instantly built an airy castle of fair and stately proportions. Here was the very thing she needed—a wife for Freddie, with a family connection to be proud of,



nay, a title which would shed its reflected lustre on her boy.

Thus the good lady had done her best to cultivate the acquaintance of the Prendergasts, and, all unsuspectingly, was giving her son every opportunity of winning Gertrude, if he were so minded. There is nothing in which more mistakes are made, than in trying to carve out, as it were, the future of others in these matters ; so seldom, if ever, is the result of meddling interference that which is desired or expected. Poor Mrs. Freeling was to find the truth of this.

Aunt Helen was delighted to hear of the invitation to the Grange, and instantly began to review the girls' dresses.

"This is a trying time of year," she said. "A sort of intermediate stage between winter and summer things. But, Gertrude, I think you might wear your striped Japanese silk with green trimming. You always look well in that."

"I am not going to the Grange ; Cecil and Joanna are quite enough."

"My dear, you certainly *must* go ; I never heard of such an idea. I am sure your father will say you must go. I only heard to-day that Mr. Freeling said——"

Gertrude rose suddenly from her low stool by the fire and abruptly left the room. On her way she

stumbled against Charlie, who was coming up to the schoolroom with his wonted alacrity.

"Well, old Truda, where now?"

"Anywhere," said Gertrude, "away from the drawing-room and Aunt Helen's chatter."

"Why, Truda, what is the matter?"

They were in the schoolroom now, which was somewhat changed since the old days. A new carpet and two new chairs had been added; there was also a writing-table which was Gertrude's property, and a work-table which was Joanna's.

"Charlie," Gertrude said, throwing herself into the old arm-chair, now concealing its age under a new leather covering: "Charlie, I wish I could go with you out to Oswald at Melbourne. You can go into a Bank there and I will keep house for you both; that would be nice."

"I am very fond of you, as you know, Truda, but I am not sure I would trust to your housekeeping. You would starve us one day and feed us to repletion the next. But why are you in such hot haste to be off to Australia?"

"I don't know; of course I should be sorry to leave Joan and the little ones and Cecil and papa; but I am so tired, so sick of hearing all this nonsense about that dreadful Freddie Freeling. I hate the very sound of his name!"

"Oh! that is it," said Charlie coolly. "I understand now. Well, I should have thought the Grange rather a grand place, and Freeling is a harmless fellow."

"Don't be stupid, Charlie. Don't take up the cry against me. Unless papa insists, I won't go to the Grange. I will go and see dear Watty, and sit for a whole afternoon with her. A dull dear old woman is better than a dull disagreeable young man. Why didn't he stop up in the North, and show off some of his hardware to catch customers?"

"It seems he wants to catch something else," said Charlie. "Now I am off, Truda, and must leave you to your grumblings. I like you far better in your jolly moods."

"Where are you going?"

"For my music lesson, and I am going to stay to tea."

Mrs. Stuart taught Charlie music and French, and the hours he spent with her were the happiest of his life. It was wonderful how she found time for every one who needed her help. When Charlie arrived he was greeted with a bright smile, and the words, "I have had good news to-day, Charlie. Tom Spiers is getting on so well in his place. I have had a letter from him, sealed with a big red wafer, and saying he was sure 'honoured madam would

be glad to know his wages had risen, and the gardener had told the master he deserved it.'"

Charlie took the curious piece of writing and spelling into his hand, and laughed heartily as he attempted to decipher it.

"Another of your promising pupils," he said ; "he beats me, I think." Then his face grew grave as he said, "I often wish I could know what has become of Weston. Now his people have all cleared off, I suppose I never shall hear any more of him. Poor Weston!"

"Perhaps one day we shall hear good of him," Mrs. Stuart said. "There is always hope."

Charlie seated himself at the piano ; but before he began his exercise he turned towards Mrs. Stuart, and said with a look which was a greater reward to her than any words could be, "You live on hope : you did not give up even me."

Dr. Prendergast decided that the three girls ought to go to Mrs. Freeling's, and that most certainly Gertrude must go, as she had tacitly accepted the invitation when it was given.

Gertrude therefore dressed herself in the Japanese silk trimmed with green, and on the day appointed stood ready, with Cecil, waiting for the pony carriage to come round. The two girls looked very nice with their white straw hats and drooping feathers

and Aunt Helen came into the hall to survey them with pardonable pride.

"How well those dresses look ! Gertrude, let me just pull your *tablier* a little more to the right. It is wonderful what a talent you have for putting on your things crooked. And here is Joan in her black silk ; but that cream-coloured polonaise always suits her. I hear the carriage coming round. Good-bye, dears, good-bye ;" and Aunt Helen watched the departure of the party with Sibyl and Daisy on either side of her.

"How nice it must be to be grown up," said little ten-year-old Sibyl. "I wish I was going to the Grange."

"All in good time, Sibyl dear ; and I have a notion we shall all go to the Grange as often as we like some day."

Alas ! poor Aunt Helen !

It was a lovely spring day, and that pure emerald veil was over the trees which lasts for so short a time, and is so beautiful while it lasts.

Bell and Ball trotted quickly and steadily along, and the three girls felt themselves infected by the bright cheerfulness of the new-born life around them.

Gertrude indulged in many impromptu couplets, which made her companions laugh, and reminded Joan of early times, when she was so fond of

rhyming "Joan" with "moan" or "groan;" and used to talk of her volume of poems to be dedicated to her. But as they drew near the Grange, Gertrude's spirits sank; and when a vision of the redoubtable Freddy Freeling in the portico was caught sight of, she gave vent to her feelings by saying sharply:

"There was a young person named Freeling,
Whose conduct was very displeasing;
When they wished him to go,
He always said, 'No,'
That displeasing young person named Freeling."

The rhyme was scarcely ended when Bell and Ball stopped before the wide flight of steps leading up to the great hall door of the Grange, and the "unpleasing young person" stood ready to help the girls out of the carriage.

"Lovely day, isn't it?" he said. "Everything looks its best. I say, Miss Coningham, a relation of yours has turned up; perhaps you know it."

"I have so few relations," Joan began.

And then, as they were all crossing the hall to the door where Mrs. Freeling stood to welcome them, Cecil said, "It must be that ubiquitous Claude Coningham."

All doubt was set at rest by Mrs. Freeling saying, as she led the way into the drawing-room:

"There is no need to introduce you to our new neighbours, Lord Beauclerc and Miss Coningham."

Joanna started back, as a tall, thin man, looking older than his years, advanced towards her.

Surprise prevented Joan from speaking, but Lord Beauclerc bowed low over her hand, saying, "I am proud to make your acquaintance, fair cousin ; introduce me, please," he continued, looking towards Cecil and Gertrude. "Indeed," he went on, bowing at every word, "my ill-health has for once assumed a pleasant guise, bringing me into such society as this !"

"And I am sure we are only too pleased to have such a neighbour," said Mrs. Freeling. "You did not know then that Lord Beauclerc had come to Fairlawn, Miss Coningham. I begged him to meet you to-day at luncheon ! Freddie and I only called yesterday. We had no idea he was a relation of yours—a great invalid, I fear," Mrs. Freeling went on aside.

Some more guests arrived, and the talk became general and confused. Joanna was conscious throughout luncheon that Lord Beauclerc's eyes were constantly directed towards her. Poor old Miss Coningham, who seemed utterly confused and bewildered at a table where a large party was gathered, glanced furtively at Joanna, and was so

absent and *distracte*, and in such terror of doing anything which might provoke the wrath of her tyrant, that she put powdered sugar on her *mayonnaise*, and then peppered it as a corrective, till she sneezed violently. When the guests had dispersed into the garden, where lawn tennis, then a novelty, was ready, Lord Beauclerc came towards Joanna and said :

“Will you grant an old man a few minutes’ conversation in the drawing-room? I am afraid to meet the breath of this treacherous wind ; you may go to the young people, Isabella,” he said, as his sister was following him humbly.

But Joanna’s native dignity and reserve seemed to set up a barrier which Lord Beauclerc dared not pass.

He began in a free joking way. “Well, upon my word, it was too bad of Claude to try and deceive me about you. You look like a princess of the blood, at least. When are you free from the rule of the apothecary, eh?”

“I really scarcely understand your allusion, Lord Beauclerc, but if you mean Dr. Prendergast, I must warn you that he is my best and dearest friend, to whom I owe everything.”

“Even Ashton Court,” said Lord Beauclerc, with a covert sneer. “Well, you may give him my compliments, and say that the horrors of Culvers, and all

its cold and desolation, have proved too much for me, and I have been advised by my physician to try a milder climate ; doubtless in this case doctors would disagree. However I saw that Fairlawn was advertised to be let, at a small cost ; and being situated in a neighbourhood full of youth and beauty, I did not hesitate to take it for a year or so, though the journey half killed me. I had to lie in bed for a week after I got here, and only came out to-day to see you, fair cousin. My son will be here shortly—he is eccentric, as you may know—likes the society of tradespeople ; and by-the-bye, that in this house will suit him—hardware and tea-trays, isn't it ?”

Joanna drew herself up to her full height, as she moved to leave the room.

“Mr. and Mrs. Freeling are most kind and hospitable people,” she said. “Now I think I must join the party in the garden,” and she left Lord Beauclerc writhing under the sense of defeat, and baffled in his intentions and schemes.

And, indeed, as the summer wore on, the whole fabric of airy castles fell to the ground. Gertrude steadily and decidedly refused poor Mr. Freeling ; and to her father's question :

“You are quite sure, Truda, you will not regret your decision afterwards ?” she answered :

"Papa, I would not marry Freddie Freeling for the world; imagine giving you such a stupid son-in-law!"

Dr. Prendergast laughed, and said he was grateful for her consideration; and Gertrude flung her arms round him in her old impetuous fashion, exclaiming:

"You dear father! you know you do not wish me to marry that spoiled boy."

"It would be a case of two spoiled children, I am afraid," was the answer.

And then Gertrude added passionately:

"I shall never marry any one."

"All in good time, my dear; now run away, and leave me to write to the poor fellow."

But Gertrude lingered.

"Papa, what did Claude—I mean Mr. Coninghame—say, when he came here yesterday?"

"He behaved like a gentleman, my dear, and assured me he much disliked his father coming into this neighbourhood; and he said he would take no undue advantage of it, nor force himself upon us, under the circumstances."

"Papa, I have a question I want to ask you, only you must promise never to let anybody know I asked it. Do you think Claude Coninghame wants to marry Joanna?"

"I think it looks like it, Gertrude ; but I have no positive reason for saying so. It is all very perplexing and tangled ; but I advise you now to try and dismiss these matters from your mind. You and Joan continue to be great friends, I hope."

"Oh ! yes, papa. I am the only person to whom she ever mentions Oswald ; and I tell her everything, or"—Gertrude corrected with her wonted honesty—"nearly everything."

Mr. Freeling was a long time before he could be persuaded that Gertrude's answer was final. At last, when he grasped the reality, he took it much to heart. His mother rejoiced, and still looked hopefully towards Joanna and her inheritance, when this delusion should have passed away. Meanwhile she shut up the Grange, and dragged away the unwilling Freddie on a tour, which was to comprise Switzerland and the Italian Lakes, and to be prolonged by a winter in Paris.

Claude Coningham paid his father visits at stated intervals ; but after the first two or three months he did not call at the Priory. Thus all subjects of discussion and annoyance were held in abeyance. The days and months rolled on, bringing with them their daily portion of work and occupation and also bringing nearer and nearer the day when Joanna should come of age.


The two years of which Oswald had spoken on the Pier at Clevedon were nearly over, and arrangements were being made for the reception of Joanna at Ashton Court; for Mr. Field agreed with Dr. Prendergast that she ought to live there, and take upon herself the duties and responsibilities of her position.

"Of course we must find a suitable person to live with her," Mr. Field said. "A widow lady would be the best, if we can hit upon the right one."

For some time this question remained undecided, but in the spring of the year in which Joanna attained her majority, Mr. Hastings, the vicar, to the surprise of all the little world of Minsterholme, brought home a wife—a quiet, gentle, subdued woman, who had evidently seen much sorrow, and whose past history his sister only knew. She was a widow, and was the Rose who had been the love of his early years. His marriage liberated his sister, Mrs Stuart; and to Joanna's intense relief and joy, she consented, at Dr. Prendergast's earnest request, to act as Joanna's chaperone and friend at Ashton Court.

St. Michael's Day rose fair and calm, a soft haze lay upon the woods round Ashton, and the September sun shone with subdued and chastened lustre as the young mistress and her friend Mrs. Stuart

went through the drive towards the church, where, by especial request, service was held at eight o'clock. Long and earnestly did Joanna pray for strength as she knelt in the place where as a little girl she had sat with her grandmother : and as she thought of the past, a feeling of thankfulness was the prominent one. How much had she learned since those far-off days ; how tenderly and gently God had led her ; and how inexpressibly sweet was the assurance of His love and care. The key-note of this eventful day was struck by that quiet service, and Mrs. Stuart looked at the calm, sweet face opposite her at breakfast with admiration and love. When breakfast was over, Joanna went into the old hall, where all the servants assembled. With a low voice, which gathered strength as she went on, she said a few words of thanks to them for their welcome ; and then she gave out the Psalms which she read alternately with her little congregation. Then followed the beautiful Collect for the day and other prayers, which Mrs. Stuart offered in her sweet clear voice ; and very soon after, the carriage wheels were heard, and Joanna stood on the steps of Ashton Court to receive the whole family from the Priory, including the doctor himself ; every one bore in their hand a present, while Joanna was half smothered with kisses.



"It seems an age since yesterday morning when you went away," the children said ; "but what a beautiful place this is ; you will never care for the old Priory again."

There was one whose loss all felt, though no one mentioned him. But Dr. Prendergast, just before he drove back to Minsterholme, called Joanna aside, and drawing her hand through his arm, led her into the quaint old-fashioned yew-tree walk, where they could talk undisturbed and unnoticed.

"My dear," he said, "I think on the last night you spent under my roof we said almost all we had to say to each other ; but I am bound to execute a commission entrusted to me, and give you this letter, which Oswald enclosed to me, with a request to deliver it to you on your birthday."

A great flush of joy spread over Joan's face. All these long months Oswald, true to his promise, had not written to her anything that the whole family might not read. His home letters had always mentioned her, as he mentioned his sisters ; but with a fixedness of purpose which did him honour, he never alluded to his great love for her.

"You are your own mistress now, my dear child," Dr. Prendergast said ; "it is not for me to interfere further ; therefore I give you Oswald's letter ; and Mr. Field, whom I consulted, thinks I am right to do so."

"Thanks," she said looking up at him with a bright smile, "this is my best birthday present."

Dr. Prendergast kissed her affectionately, and left her, as he knew she would wish, alone. Then passing under the dark yew-trees, where the sun piercing the plummy branches lay upon the mossy turf in bands of golden glory, Joanna read words which told her that time and distance and separation had only strengthened Oswald's love, and that he only waited for her word, to give up everything in Melbourne, and come home to her. She was scarcely conscious of the passing of time, nor how long she had been reading her letter, when a rustling in the tangled path leading to her retreat made her look up; the next moment Claude Coningham was at her side.

"You can hardly be angry with me," he said, "for coming to congratulate you on your birthday; the important day when you come into your inheritance," he added.

"No, indeed I am very glad to see you. I do so wish to be friends."

He took her hand and pressed it warmly.

"I think we understand each other, Joan?"

"Yes, I think we do."

"A ridiculous notion got into everybody's head that because I was poor and a Beauclerc, I should

wish to enrich myself by your means. John, you knew me better!"

"Yes," she answered again. "I knew you were far above any such thoughts and schemes."

"My poor father must have annoyed you, I feel sure; try to forgive him, he is very ill now. I was summoned yesterday, for poor old Aunt Isabel thought the end was near. I think he may yet linger on, but it is a distressing scene at that little cottage. Perhaps if he rallies at all, you will go and see him; poor Aunt Isabel needs some one to speak to."

"Indeed I will go to-day, if you like?"

"No," he said, "don't sadden your festivities here by a melancholy visit on a day like this. To-morrow if you can go I should really be glad; for his fancy for coming into this neighbourhood has made my visits to him necessarily less frequent, as I can't leave the office where I work for more than two days at a time in justice to the other partners, and the distance is so much greater than from Culvers. We have let Culvers for a term of years to a man who has no family, and only cares for the place in the hunting and shooting season. Now I must go; but I must give you my birthday present first."

He drew from his pocket a little case, and clasped


round Joanna's wrist a plain gold bracelet, on which was engraved the old motto, *Treu und Fest*.

"Thank you, Claude, it is beautiful. I shall always value it so much, and I hope you and I shall always be faithful and true friends as well as relations."

"There is one question I should like to ask before I go. It is about——"

As he spoke there appeared at the end of the green path, standing in a band of the golden light, Gertrude Prendergast. For a moment she stood with wide-open eyes and parted lips, the light flickering on her white dress, and touching the masses of fair hair till it shone like gold. Then, before Joanna could reach her, or even before she could speak, she had vanished.

"What a vision!" Claude said, and he turned to follow her: but when he and Joanna reached the house Gertrude was nowhere to be seen. Claude went into the drawing-room for a few minutes, and listened to Daisy and Sibyl's eager account of the grand tea which was coming off in the afternoon to all the village children, and the dinner to the fathers and mothers which was to be given the next day, and how Joanna said they were to come out to Ashton every Saturday, and that either Cecil or Gertrude were to stay there with her always, and



it was all so delightful. Aunt Helen too was brimming over with satisfaction, feeling a part and lot in the stately old house, and only regretting that Joanna had not re-furnished the rooms.

"They did want brightening up, but no doubt that would come when——"

She looked at Claude significantly, and he supplied the word with the utmost coolness.

"Yes; when she marries. Well, I hope she and the future master of Ashton Court will agree about the colour of the curtains, and the arrangements of the buhl cabinets."

Claude soon after took leave, pleading his father's state as an excuse. The rest of the day passed only too quickly, and the children went home impressed with the conviction that it was a very grand thing indeed to have Joanna the mistress of Ashton Court.

A week after the birthday, Mr. Field came down to meet Dr. Prendergast at Ashton, and to make the final arrangements for Joanna's complete emancipation from the surveillance of her guardians. Mr. Field was a brisk little lawyer; keen and quick-sighted, he treated everything as a matter of business, and consequently felt no difficulty in saying:

"By the terms of Lady Beauclerc's will, Dr. Prendergast and I were bound to discourage all

suitors, and forbid any engagement of marriage. Now, Miss Coninghame, you are free, and I only hope you will be happy in any choice you make."

Joanna was sitting at the old mahogany library table, which was polished till the surface shone like glass, and her two guardians were on either side of her. She had signed her name several times, and entered into Mr. Field's business details with intelligence and interest. But Mr. Field's last remark brought the colour to her face, and she waited a moment to gather up her resolution; then, addressing Mr. Field, she said quietly, but very firmly :

"My choice has long been made. I can only marry one person, and Dr. Prendergast knows, and I believe you know whom I mean. I am willing to wait till it is thought best for him to come home : but I can never change."

Dr. Prendergast could not speak, but, putting his hand out, he grasped Joanna's and held it fast in his, while Mr. Field said, in his business-like tone :

"All right, my dear Miss Coninghame ; you are your own mistress now, and no one has any right to interfere. Now I must be looking at Bradshaw, for I shall repent it if I miss the train this evening, as I have important business on hand to-morrow."

He gathered up the papers, and he and Dr. Prendergast left the room together. When Dr. Prendergast returned he found Joanna sitting where he had left her, her head bowed upon her clasped hands. He thought at first she was unhappy, and called her by name rather anxiously, "Joan, my dear child." Then she rose, and with sudden vehemence, put her arms round one who had been to her as a father for many years.

"Then I may write and say he may come home, may I?"

"Yes, my dear, you are at liberty to do so; all I can say is—may my son prove worthy!"

From the moment when her engagement with Oswald was ratified, Joanna seemed to spring into new life and energy. With Mrs. Stuart's loving help every possible work for the good of her people was organised; and there was yet another work which gathered daily interest. Continually did Joanna find her way to Fairlawn, and took with her loving help and sympathy, which touched a chord of hidden tenderness in poor old Miss Coningham's heart. At first Lord Beauclerc resolutely refused to see Joanna; but as the dreary winter days became more and more intolerable to him, he consented to admit her. Little by little Joan's gentle, persuasive voice entered into the poor, sin-

sick soul, with the message of love and forgiveness. What he would have previously resented as cant from any one else, he listened to from her lips ; and before the last and final seizure fell upon that enfeebled body, the soul had grasped the great reality that in One blessed Name there is to be found the remedy for sin, and the pardon for the sinner.

It was two days after Lord Beauclerc's funeral that Claude walked slowly up the drive to Ashton Court. It was a glorious day of early summer, when earth sits enthroned in all the fulness of beauty, decked like a queen in royal robes on some great festival. The wind scarcely moved the foliage of the stately limes, as the sun threw their shadows on the emerald turf in great dark masses. Beyond lay a vision of the flower garden, ablaze with scarlet and gold blossoms. As Claude looked around, the contrast between the little dreary house he had left, and this scene of beauty, instinct with life, weighed on him. Death, and especially the ending of a sad life like his father's, is always solemn ; and indeed Claude looked upon his new position with doubt, and something almost akin to dread.

The old butler's answer to the question, "Is Miss Coningham at home?" "Yes, my lord!" jarred on him. The title brought Culvers' dreary and

desolate, and the heavy weight of debts to his mind, which, however much he had tried, was only lessened, not wiped off, and a name which had denied him and his an entrance to Ashton Court for many years. Joanna, hearing his voice, came out of her own little sitting-room, and welcomed him warmly.

"I am so glad you are come," she said. "You will stay all day. No one is here but Gertrude Prendergast."

During his father's illness, Claude and his cousin had been much thrown together, and there was the most perfect confidence between them.

"Did you walk from Fairlawn?" Joanna asked. "You must have felt the heat. I have been so busy all the morning with my plans for the new School-house and Cottage Hospital; but I have several things I want to say to you. One is about Miss Coninghame—Aunt Isabel. She is to have a home at Ashton; there is room enough, and I know the only person who has a voice in the matter will approve. It is delightful to think that he will be here now before many months are over."

Joan's eyes were glowing with happiness as she spoke; but she checked herself, for she saw her cousin looked sad and dull.

"You deserve to be happy," he said. "You have an inheritance of greater value than Ashton in your

unselfish, kindly heart. Now, Joan, tell me something I want to know. Is it true that your friend Gertrude is going to marry young Freeling?"

"Oh, Claude; what nonsense. She can't endure the poor fellow: and now he is come back to the Grange more hopelessly in love than ever, poor Truda is so bothered that she is really made quite ill by all the worry."

"She gives me very little opportunity of judging; if she can't endure poor Freddie Freeling, I expect I should come in for a rather stronger epithet."

Joanna looked earnestly at Claude, and the colour came into her face.

"Claude," she said at last, "I think you are making a great mistake. Oh, here come some visitors; if you like you can escape through the window."

Claude wanted no second bidding, and went out into the garden, and walked towards the shady yew-tree path where he and Joanna had had their explanation on her birthday. He pushed aside the overhanging branches, and found himself in the cool retreat. It was a favourite haunt of Joanna's, and she had erected a rustic seat at the farther end of the path. There a figure in white, leaning back in a listless dejected attitude, arrested him. Gertrude had been reading, but the book had fallen from her

hand, and lay upon the turf at her feet. A lock of her abundant hair had got loosened from the masses, and there was the same negligence about her as of old. Claude hesitated a moment, and then drew near; Gertrude started from her day dream, and said :

“Do you want Joanna? She is in the house, I think.”

“No,” Claude said calmly. “I only want you.”

Gertrude’s face flushed, and she said :

“Shall we turn towards the house? I am going home to-day, Papa is to drive over for me, and leave Cecil in my place.”

“Gertrude, is that all you can say to me?”

“I don’t know what else you want.”

“Then I must tell you; sit down and hear me out.”

But Gertrude had no such intention. She stooped to pick up the fallen book, and then said, though she faltered a little :

“I don’t want to hear anything, please; it won’t make any difference now.”

“Gertrude, shall I tell you what I begin to believe—that we have been playing at cross purposes all the while? You thought I intended to marry my cousin Joanna, and I, on my side, thought you were going to marry that neighbour of ours.”

“Don’t!” Gertrude said. “You have no right to say such a thing.”

“Have I not? Well, Gertrude, it seems I had no right to think it, or say it, and you on your side were equally mistaken. Do you remember,” he went on as Gertrude’s defiant air softened, and her head drooped—“Do you remember a high hedge and a bunch of big blackberries? Ah! Gertrude, from that day to the day I saw you on the Pier at Clevedon, you were a vision to me of what I might love, if I dare; and from the day I saw you on the Pier at Clevedon to this moment, I have loved you, not as a vision, but a reality. Mine has been a hardish life, and even now the struggle is not over. I have no grand home to offer you, Gertrude; only a moderate fortune, which I work for; and I mean to work on till every farthing of long-accumulated debt is paid. But if you can take me as I am, and help me on in a good way, if you can like me ever so little, I think my life will be the brighter and better; and surely, surely you know what I will strive to make yours.”

It was characteristic of Gertrude that she said:

“Ah! I see—that day when I found you here with Joan—her birthday!”

“Yes! I remember, we were ratifying our friendly relations, so long forbidden to us.”

“Ah! she was telling you she was engaged to my brother, and then you thought you would——”

"Would do what?"

"Console yourself with me."

In spite of himself Claude laughed, and Gertrude broke down entirely and hid her face, half smiles, half tears, on his shoulder.

When Dr. Prendergast arrived with Cecil and Mrs. Stuart, who had been at the Vicarage for two days, Joanna was found alone.

"Where is Truda?" her father said. "She must return with me this afternoon, for Aunt Helen wants her for a garden party to-morrow. Where is Truda?"

Then Joanna put her hand through Dr. Prendergast's arm, and said in a low voice, with a bright smile, as she looked up into his face :

"Gertrude is in the yew-tree walk with Claude Coninghame."

Joy and grief, care and trouble, peace and unrest, alternate in this life of ours. But it is pleasant to leave the story of young lives at a sunny point, and to feel that when the clouds rise, as rise they must over the sky, there will be found a refuge from the storm for hearts who recognise their allegiance to the dear Master and Lord of us all.

Once more it is Joanna's birthday. Great news is stirring, for a telegram has reached the Priory

that day, that Oswald Prendergast has landed at Liverpool, and might be expected in the afternoon.

Dr. Prendergast drove out to Ashton Court with the tidings, and found Joan at the school teaching a class of little rosy girls the mysteries of the multiplication table."

Dr. Prendergast was noticed first by Mrs. Stuart, who came to the door, and said :

"Is anything the matter?"

"Good news," he said ; "Oswald will be at home in a few hours."

The movement made Joanna look round, and she came hastily towards Dr. Prendergast.

"The *Antelope* is come in ten days earlier than was expected. Oswald will be here in the afternoon. Many happy returns of the day, my dear."

Joanna's dark eyes shone and glistened.

"Please may I come home with you at once! I wish to be at home when he arrives."

"Is not this home?" he asked. "Would you not like to see him here?"

"No; if you don't mind, I should like to be where I first learned what home meant when he comes."

"Very well, then. Get into my carriage at once, and let us drive back together."

"Mrs. Stuart, please will you tell them we shall

still have our birthday dinner? We shall all come back in the afternoon."

The little school-girls looked on with wide-open wondering eyes; and Mrs. Stuart, who returned to her place, found it difficult to settle them again to their lessons. So Joan and Dr. Prendergast again drove together to the Priory very much as they had done years before; silently for the most part, for the thoughts of both were busy with the past.

The telegram had made a great excitement at the Priory. Joanna agreed with Gertrude that Oswald, with his ancient dislike to any great demonstration, would be better pleased if they were not all in the hall when he arrived.

"I think," she said, "I shall watch from the school-room window; and I think, Truda, I would rather be alone."

"So you shall; I will protect you from all intruders."

Thus the day wore on, and Joan, from her post in the old window-seat, watched the flies and carriages which passed the end of the Priory Road. At last, one turned towards the house, and Joan knew he was come.

A tall and well-known figure sprang out first—Claude Coningham. He had also had a telegram, and had received Oswald at Liverpool. Then Joan's

eager gaze fastened on Oswald. He got out in his old leisurely fashion, and then there were murmurs of many voices in the hall. Joanna's heart beat fast as she went towards the door. After a delay, which seemed to her interminable, the schoolroom door opened, and Oswald came in.

"At last!" he said. And so these two true and steadfast hearts were united, and their patience and faith were rewarded.

"The old chair. The old table!" Oswald said, looking round. "Oh, Joan, it is all very much like a dream!"

"I thought you would like best to find me here," she said in her own simple way.

"Yes," he answered earnestly; "you always do know exactly what I like; but how well you look! Oh, Joan, what will people say to the choice the lady of Ashton has made? They will say she has made a great mistake. How they will pity you, Joan! I am not going to lead an idle life, you know, at Ashton Court; I have kept up all my Oxford ties, and I am at work on a history which I hope will turn out something—and be worthy of you."

"Oh! Oswald, directly I am with you, I feel it is all so wonderful that you should care for me in this way. But we will both find plenty to do; plenty of work for God, Oswald."

She said this half timidly, but by the tone of his letters she had discovered that religion was not now, as he used to say in old times, "outside him."

He paused a moment—then he said :

"Yes, Joan ; I hope I have learned that God's service alone is freedom, and faith only can guide us through the mazes of this world to a better and higher life."

"Oh, I am so thankful," she exclaimed. "So thankful, and so happy !"

The whole party, including Sibyl and Daisy, met that evening at dinner at Ashton Court. Thus old ties were strengthened and new ties formed, and the bond of family love drawn closer.

And now we must end this simple chronicle of youthful lives and loves. As men and women, those whom we have known as girls and boys, must do their part in the battle-field of life. If once a resolute stand is made on the rightful side, there is hope for all future struggles ; and no one who looked on Charlie Prendergast's face could doubt that he, perhaps beyond all the others, had already fought in many a conflict and won many a victory. As Dr. Prendergast's eye looked round on the happy faces gathered at Joanna's table on the evening of Oswald's return, it lingered with especial pride and

tenderness on his lame son's, shining with unselfish joy in the joy of others, as by God's grace he nobly and bravely took up the cross God had laid on him ; for we may say with the poet—

“ Life is only bright when it proceedeth
Towards a truer, deeper life above ;
Human love is sweetest when it leadeth
To a more Divine and perfect love.

“ Learn the mystery of progression duly,
Do not call each glorious change decay ;
But know we only held our treasures truly
When it seems as if they passed away.

“ Nor dare to blame God's gifts for incompleteness
In that want their beauty lies : they roll
Towards some infinite depth of love and sweetness,
Bearing onward man's reluctant soul.”

THE END.

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